

Neopronouns in Action

a compilation of short stories featuring a variety of neopronouns, with the aim of having fun, normalizing neopronouns, and showing people who aren't sure how to use them how easy they are once you learn the rules!

The “genre” will range from scifi, to fantasy, to realistic!

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001: The Mirrored Dream

Neopronouns: ze/hir/(hirs)/hirsself, which will follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself for this story.

Replace "She" with "Ze"

Replace "Her" with "Hir"

Replace "Hers" with "Hirs"

Replace "Herself" with "Hirsself"

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence

set up around hir yard so the puppy can go outside without hir having to walk it. Hir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting hir use, since ze lots hers. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

001: The Mirrored Dream

Ze had always been a misfit growing up, for as long as ze could remember. Magical ability ran in hir family, but even so, ze was a strange one. Hir abilities were different from hir mother and father's, even from hir aunts and uncles and all hir cousins. Everyone else in hir family had elemental powers of water, fire, wood, wind, and metal. But hir powers didn't manifest in the ability to control fire or move the air, or bend the water or grow trees or shape metal. Hir magical abilities came in the form of hir dreams, where, for as long as ze had been able to remember, had been more like a second world than anything else, not even close to what hir family members described their dreams as, once ze was old enough to ask them about their worlds, since, not knowing any better, ze'd assumed that what ze dreamt was normal.

It wasn't.

Other people didn't have entire worlds and landscapes in their dreams that they came back to night after night without fail, and most people weren't even able to remember their dreams once they woke up, while ze could remember any detail as clearly as ze could remember the things that happened while ze was awake.

It wasn't until ze was nine that ze really began to understand the scope of hir power, what ze could do with it. It wasn't just another world in hir dreams, it was a mirror world. The people ze spoke to there were reflections of the people in this world, reflections of hir family and friends and village. The things ze did there affected hir waking world, and hir waking world affected the dreaming world.

When ze was nine, ze stole a bracelet in hir dreaming world, because even there hir family didn't have much money, and ze wanted it desperately. When ze woke up again, ze realized with shock that a bracelet was around hir wrist, different to the one in hir dream, but the same. A mirror image. Ze had stolen it in hir dream, and so stole it in the waking world.

Ze took off the bracelet immediately and hid it under hir bed, overwhelmed with confusion that was warring with quickly rising guilt. Ze had stolen it from Ki Beya, the craftsman who lived down the road, and he was supposed to be coming over to their house for dinner later that evening.

He didn't make any mention of a bracelet being stolen, but ze didn't ask, either, too afraid to hear the answer.

That night in hir dream, ze snuck the bracelet back into the display

case, and when ze woke up again, it was no longer hidden under hir bed.

And when ze walked down the street, ze saw it displayed in Ki Beya's shop window just as it had been before, in the exact spot ze'd placed it in the dream.

Now four years later, ze was thirteen, and ze needed to figure out how to use this ability to save hir sister's life.

002: A Different Perspective

Neopronouns: vi/vir/vis/virself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with vi

Replace him with vir

Replace his with vis

Replace himself with virself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

Becomes:

“Vi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as vi gets a fence

set up around vis yard so the puppy can go outside without vir having to walk it. Vis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vir use, since vi lost vis. Vi's going to buy toys and train the puppy virself. ”

002: A Different Perspective

Vi was born under blood moons, and so spent the first thirty years of vis life in the Maw of Kyrun, being taught the skills required of all blood hunters.

Vi learned how to focus vis sight to see past the energy and into the body world, the realm that very few kiyal who were born under other moons would ever even get a glimpse of. There were a rare few who had the ability, of course, because nothing could ever be neat or simple, but they were few and far between, and it was even rarer for any of them to match up to even the weakest of blood hunters.

On vis thirty-first anniversary of life, vi was discharged from the Maw of Kyrun after the ceremony of degradation, that would make vis status as a blood hunter official in all the laws of the world. Vi was now qualified to take contracts for anyone who required the services of a blood hunter, with the Maw of Kyrun to be held personally responsible for any misbehavior on vis part, so that the contractors would feel secure in bargaining for vis services.

Now a free to travel wherever vi wished, the first thing vi did was head north, towards the pole. Vi'd read so many stories about the atmosphere there, it had always been vis dream to visit once vi

graduated, and now vi had that chance. The Maw of Nuryk had been built right on top of the maelstrom, chained into place by the careful work of thousands of workers and scholars so that it would not budge a heartbeat out of place even if the world ended tomorrow.

They would welcome vir into their ranks happily, and vi would take vir turn fulfilling whatever menial tasks the Maw required for its various forms of upkeep when vi was not currently under contract. A third of vis payment would go to the Maw of Nuryk while vi was sheltered there, and the leadership would in return use that payment to continue trading resources and communications with the Maw of Kyrun, and, further south, the Maw of Yrunk, and to the east, the Maw of Unkyr.

There were other Maws out there, further away, too far for easy communication, and though vi had studied their history while vi was younger, the information hadn't been crucial, and so it had faded with time, overwhelmed by all the other things vi had learned that were more pressing and important.

Like how to descend safely, and make sure you would be able to ascend again. How to carry someone back with you if they fell, how to interact with the body world without becoming trapped, how to communicate with the benevolent bodies, and most importantly, how

to track and banish or kill the bodies, sometimes called projections, that entered their world.

Vi had already ventured down into the body world several times while vi was still an apprentice so that the older, more experienced blood hunters could demonstrate the proper techniques. It was one thing to be told how to do something, to study diagrams, it was another entirely to be there in the body world trying to do it properly yourself.

The task had been to communicate with the local benevolent body that had worked with the Maw of Kyrun for generations, helping to guide the younger students down the right path.

Parsing its style of communicating had been vis most challenging lesson in vis whole life. Vi could not simply watch and listen, vi needed to sink deep into meditation, and feel the vibrations the body's voice sent through the atmosphere. Vis task was to establish clear, two-way communication, and to prove that vi was able to communicate with the body—whose name, vi had been told, was Silver Metal—vi had to find the well-hidden body object that Silver Metal guided vir to, then the reverse, with vir guiding Silver Metal to the symphoric object the elder blood hunters had sunken down into the body world and hidden, with its location only revealed to vir

once vi had found the first object.

Silver Metal, as a body, had been alien and strange, but not as frightening as vi had been afraid of. Yes, it was dense, almost solid, but there was the slightest hint of sympherory that resonated from it at all times, and that, vi was told, by Silver Metal itself, was how they were able to communicate.

Vi would not be able to see Silver Metal again unless vi returned to the Maw of Kyrun, but there would be other local bodies near the Maw or Nuryk, some of them benevolent, who would help vi in vis tasks when necessary, and some of them wicked. These were the ones vi would help to track down when they invaded the real world, and depending on their level of hostility and their ability to inflict damage, they would either be banished, or killed outright.

Vi had never had to kill a wicked body yet, or even met one. The Maw of Kyrun had a large network of benevolent bodies surrounding it, and they did their part to stop the wicked bodies before they could breach the sympheric world. This would not be the case at the pole, which was another of the many reasons vi had chosen it as vis first station.

The number of wicked bodies intruding into the real world had been

rising there for the past few years, with more and more blood hunters being drawn in to deal with it. No where else within travel distance needed as much assistance as the pole did, and vis job was to help, above all else, so that's where vi would go.

003: Werewolves

Neopronouns: card/cards, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with card

Replace its with cards

Replace itself with cardself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

“Card is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as card gets a fence set up around cards yard so the puppy can go outside without card having to walk it. Cards uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting card use, since card lost cards. Card's going to buy toys and train the puppy cardself. ”

003: Werewolves

It all started at exactly 4:32PM. Card knew that, because card had been specifically checking the time to write down when it got dark outside. It was a personal project, card'd been keeping track all year so far of the time when it got, in cards opinion, too dark outside to go out. Mostly because card hated winter, and hated having to be stuck inside for what felt like half th day, and so card had decided that card would write down the time each day, so card would be able to see when it began to get later and later as winter turned to spring and then, eventually, to summer.

So card knew for an absolute fact that the howling started at exactly 4:32PM.

And it sounded like it was coming from the woods right next to cards house, loud enough that even through the closed windows, card could hear the individual voices clearly.

There were at least four of them, maybe more, card couldn't tell. But four of them stood out clearly from the rest, recognizable because of the different tones of their voices.

Werewolves.

There was no other possibility. Wolves were native to this area, but they weren't scheduled to be reintroduced until next month. Card had had it marked on cards calender since the year before. There was going to be a huge party to celebrate it, to collect donations and raise further awareness and push for more reintroductions and protections for the native wildlife.

Card didn't know of any werewolf packs nearby, or even within day-trip distance. Card had done cards research, hoping to find someone who would be willing to turn card.

The benefits of being a werewolf far outweighed the cons, as far as card was concerned, and card really didn't understand how other people could think otherwise.

Now there were at least four werewolves, in the woods right outside cards house, howling up a storm, marking their territory.

Card had always wanted to be a werewolf, ever since card had learned that it was something you could become, but this was probably the worst timing in the world.

It was already dark out, too dark for card to just go traipsing through the woods looking for werewolves, and it was October, cards birth

month, and it was that time of the month.

Card had thought its luck had been terrible before! Every time there was an opportunity to go swimming? Oops, nope! Sorry, better luck next week! And now there were werewolves out in the woods! Card was too tired and in too much pain to go wandering around in the woods in the dark at night in the cold with cramps. That was just too high a price, especially if card didn't even now if any of the werewolves would be willing to transform card next month.

If they would even still be here next month. Did they know about the soon to be reintroduction of the red wolves to this area? Had they come just for that purpose, or was this a coincidence?

In many of the other places around the country where wolves had been reintroduced, werewolf packs had moved in to protect them. Unfortunately, there were still plenty of people who hated wolves, and would kill them on sight if they had the chance. But the protection of a pack of werewolves—especially a larger pack, was a force to be reckoned with.

Propaganda-poisoned people with access to guns were afraid of wolves, but they were more afraid of werewolves.

The howling stopped suddenly, at 4:37 exactly.

Five minutes exactly of howling, which means they probably had a stopwatch with them, or it was a song they all knew by heart.

Card was just turning towards cards computer desk to see if card could find any information on werewolf packs that had moved into the area recently...

And then the window right behind cards computer was smashed inward, and all hell broke very abruptly loose.

004: The Interworld Growing Club:

Neopronouns: it/its/itself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

004: The Interworld Growing Club:

It was the first human to join the transworld growing club, and it brought *Sambucus canadensis*, *Diospyros virginiana*, *Prunus caroliniana*, and *Passiflora incarnata* seedlings with it as the four traditional gifts.

Each new member brought with them four species native to their planet that weren't already included in the collective.

It wasn't the first new member to join, or the only first of its species - on the same planetary cycle (defined by the system's governing council as being forty-seven hours long), the first seyeir also joined, and zainun brought four species whose names the human couldn't remember how to pronounce (and thus, remember) yet.

Most of the other members of the club had never met a human before, since they were still so new to having interstellar travel capabilities, so the pre-approved list of questions it was okay to ask almost got used up entirely.

How often did it need to sleep? What did it eat? How often did it need to eat? What did it drink? Did it eat the species it had brought with it? Were the species it had brought with it pets? Did it have any

pets, and if it was safe, could they meet them?

How often did it need to sleep? Was it telepathic? Did it have any disabilities among its species? Could it smell their pheromones? Could it see their colors? Did it know what dreams were? Did it dream? Did it remember its dreams? Was this its first time leaving Earth? How many planets had it gone to? How many space stations had it gone to?

What was the spaceship it had come here in called? What was its favorite color? What was its favorite sound? Did it have a favorite time? What was its favorite food?

How many genders did humans have? What was its gender? What were its pronouns? If it was attracted to any genders, what kinds of genders was it attracted to, and how?

Would it be interested in courting an alien? Did humans lay eggs? Did humans reproduce by budding? How did it get its name? Did it have any siblings or parents or friends?

How long could it stand? How much weight could it lift? Did it take any medicines? What should they do if it was injured and couldn't help itself? What should they do if it stopped breathing?

How long could it survive in the vacuum of space? What should they do if it was exposed to the vacuum? What should they do if it got too hot? What should they do if it got too cold?

What kinds of foods could it eat? Would it show them how humans cooked and ate the species it was gifting to the collective?

The last question would take a while to come to fruition, because the seedlings it had brought with it were still very small, and wouldn't produce fruit for anywhere from a few months to several years. And the *Prunus caroliniana* wasn't edible for humans, but the on-station medical experts had concluded that the fruits would be edible for several of the other member species, which was why it had chosen it as one of the gift species. The other three were edible for humans, and for half a dozen member species, each.

Three other members were delighted that it used it/its pronouns, just like they did, though they each described their genders very differently than it did.

Once the questions were done, it was led on a tour of the communal growing area, where, safely contained behind several layers of state-of-the-art forcefields, physical walls, airlocks, and other safeguards to prevent any escapes, all of the hundreds of species that had been

gifted to the growing club were cultivated in a self-contained, self-sustaining, completely unique ecosystem.

Each new species was carefully integrated into the rest so that its outputs and inputs would work in a careful balance with the rest of the system, so that each species got what it needed, and gave what it didn't. The species weren't limited to what humans called plants, either, since most non-Earth species didn't conform to anything that could easily be categorized within the normal Earth standards. What humans called plants, animals, and mushrooms were all involved, as well as hundreds of species human taxonomists hadn't even begun to think about sorting.

The four species the human had brought with it would be given their place, once they were studied and understood by the club members who were most familiar with the system, and until then, they had much to teach the human, who was more than happy to learn, and ask its own questions.

005: Reclamation

Neopronouns ae/aer/(aers)/aerself which will follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself for this example.

Replace she with ae

Replace her with aer

Replace hers with aers

Replace herself with aerself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself. "

Becomes:

"Ae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ae gets a fence set up around aer yard so the puppy can go outside without aer having to walk it. Aer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting aer use, since ae lost aers.

Ae's going to buy toys and train the puppy aerself. ”

005: Reclamation

By day ae was known by one name, one face. And by night, or by the shadows, ae was known by another.

During the day ae had to put on an act –dress a certain way, talk a certain way, act a certain way, behave the way society expected aer to behave. And society expected aer to be meek and quiet and fragile and reserved.

By night, ae could be whoever ae wanted to be, and do whatever ae wanted to do.

What ae wanted to do was steal from the rich, and give to the poor. Take from the wealthy bastards who ‘owned’ the mines and worked the laborers to death and claimed they were the rightful owners of the gold the laborers dug up and died for. Ae wanted to snatch the food out of their hands so ae could give it to those who didn’t have any. Rip the clothes off their backs to give to those who were freezing.

Ae had to hide who ae were during the day, wearing clothes ae hated and having to pretend to be shy and ‘traditional’ in order to fend off the unwanted advances from men ae would never be attracted to,

never allowed a moment to express aer true feelings or thoughts or wishes, not even around aer brother.

Aer brother. Who'd leapt at the chance to become the marshal, the enforcer of the laws and rules that oppressed so many of their people. He thought he was above it all, better than everyone else. He thought it was their God-given right to be there, to claim ownership over that land, to drive away and oppress the people who'd been there first.

He didn't know what ae did when no one was looking, where ae went when no one was watching.

All it took was a change of clothes, a mask, a wide-brimmed hat, a pilfered rifle, and the courage to stand up for what was right.

Ae went out by aerself to ambush the coaches carrying the rich and their riches from squalid camp to fairway city, draining the life out of the people who labored for them, and all the while doing the same to the land and the people who called it home, one dynamite blast at a time.

Ae ambushed the coaches and stole from the rich. Ae stole their money, their clothes, their food, their tools, their blueprints and

plans, their letters and newspapers. After the first successful theft, ae used the stolen guns, carefully staged within the bushes, to make it seem like ae wasn't alone, like ae was covered on all sides by allies who would open fire the second anyone made a wrong move.

Aer prey was too frightened to risk calling aer bluff, and handed over their valuables without putting up a fight.

Then ae made aer escape, leaving no evidence behind by which ae could be tracked. No one suspected who ae was, the thought would never even enter their minds. They would rather turn suspicious eyes on the coach driver, as though he were somehow responsible, even though he was under just as much threat as the rest of them were.

No one suspected a thing, not even aer brother, who spent most of his time now trying desperately to convince everyone that he had the situation under control.

No one noticed that the poorest of the poor were wearing another layer of clothes beneath their outer layers, and shivering less in the biting wind, or that they complained less of hunger because of the food ae had stolen for them.

No one noticed the poor, and no one noticed aer, or realized who ae

was. There was no connection in their minds between the fearsome, unchatchable highway man who terrorized the roads, and the poor, wilting flower that ae had to pretend to be.

What they did notice were the trees they wouldn't be able to cut down any time soon because their saw blades had been stolen. The new quarries they couldn't blast, the animals they couldn't mass-slaughter because ae had stolen the supplies for their ammunition.

Ae could not kill poverty or exploitation, or stop aer people from expanding further west, not on aer own, but ae did aer part to fight it, one stagecoach at a time.

006: I Fucking Hate Athiktomistics

Neopronouns: lu/luna/lunas/lunself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with lu

Replace him with luna

Replace his with lunas

Replace himself with lunself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

Becomes:

"Lu is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as lu gets a fence set up around lunas yard so the puppy can go outside without luna having to walk it. Lunas uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting luna use, since lu lost lunas.

Lu's going to buy toys and train the puppy lunaself. ”

006: I Fucking Hate Athiktomistics

Lunas fist slammed into their jaw while they were still mid-sentence, cutting off their little speech and turning it into a shocked yelp instead as they went down, knocked to the side by the force of lunas punch.

“Don’t ever say that again.” Lu snapped, glaring down at them.

They stared back at luna in what looked like more shock than anger, holding a hand to their jaw, their eyes wide, the smug grin wiped very effectively off their face, hopefully for the rest of time, but probably not.

Lu turned and stomped away, not sure if lu would be able to stop lunaself from punching them again if they said anything else. Lu didn’t need to have the guards called down on luna again, lu was already in enough trouble after getting caught giving Ocean the extra rations lu didn’t need.

There was no one in the way of luna and the path through the field, so lu turned lunas stomping walk into a run, hoping to burn off the extra anger through physical exertion before lu got to lunas friend’s house and had to explain to them why lu was so angry.

The jerk lu had punched was a bully, lu had figured that out as soon as lu met them after moving here, and they especially loved picking on lunas friend, who was autistic, aroace, and, among many other things, touch-averse.

They didn't like being touched, not even by their friends or family.

The bully knew this, and, being an athiktomistic and amistic jerk, thought it was the funniest thing in the world to pretend to flirt with them, and just now, before lu had punched them, they'd declared that they would win over lunas friend whether they liked it or not, because no one could resist their charms, and no one alive actually really hated being touched, actually hated the idea of being kidded or hugged, they were just saying that to seem cool, playing hard to get. It was impossible for anyone to genuinely dislike being touched.

They'd been in the middle of describing how they'd hug lunas friend and not let go until they gave in and admitted they enjoyed it when lu had punched them in the face to get them to shut up.

The anger was still boiling in luans veins as hot as before, and actually seemed to be getting worse.

Running wasn't actually helping luna stop being angry. It was just

giving luna more time to think about why lu was angry, which was just making luna even angrier.

Lu slowed to a walk, and tried to take the time to focus on the plants lu was walking past, noting how they'd grown and changed since the last time lu had gone to lunas friend's house this way. Hoping distractions would help distract luna from the anger. It didn't really work.

But lu didn't want to have to tell lunas friend why lu was so unbearably angry –it would just be cruel to tell them what the bully had said. They didn't need to be stressed out like that for no reason.

Lu was definitely going to punch that jerk again the next time they saw them, even if they didn't say anything. Lunas friend did not deserve to put up with their bullying, no one did. Maybe getting punched in the face would teach them to leave other people alone, maybe it wouldn't. But it would serve them fucking right.

If anyone ever laid a hand on lunas friend without permission, lu was going to make them regret it for the rest of their lives.

007: Creature of Kindness

Neopronouns: de/dim/dis/dimself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with de

Replace him with dim

Replace his with dis

Replace himself with dimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

Becomes:

"De is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as de gets a fence set up around dis yard so the puppy can go outside without dim having to walk it. Dis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting dim use, since de lost dis. De's

going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

007: Creature of Kindness (Inspired by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein)

De waited another month before de revealed himself to the peasants.

They were already aware of dis presence, they had been for all the months that de had been collecting firewood for their stove, and bringing gifts of fruits and greens from the forest to their doorstep each morning before they awoke.

Dis footprints were visible sometimes, after it rained or in the snow —there was no way to hide them. They knew de was there, though they didn't know it was dim, or who de was.

They spoke of dim often, in praise and wonderment, in thanks and prayers for more good fortune. De knew that, without dis assistance, the winter would have been much harder on them. And they knew it too, and often de heard them wondering if their mysterious savior would show themselves, so they could show their gratitude.

Today they would be given the opportunity, and de could only hope,

silently within dis heart, that they would greet dim with the same kindness and compassion that de showed to them.

The night before, de did what de usually did - de went to the forest and gathered wood to refill the pile, and foraged for what fruits and nuts de could find, eating what de needed for dimself, and collecting the rest in the basket for their doorstep.

But rather than leaving it for them to find, this morning, de would be there to hand it to the son or the daughter, whichever opened the door first.

De did not know how they would react, but no amount of imagining or dreaming could predict it for dim. The only way de would ever know how they would react would be to let them react.

De had thought about tricking dis way in, when de was feeling more lonely, entering the house when the son and daughter away, leaving only their blind father, who would not realize anything was strange about dim. But always, de came to dis senses, knowing that trickery would get dim nowhere except to inspire mistrust and fear, and too many things could go wrong, as tempting as the idea was in dis saddest moments.

Morning came, and de waited by their door, the firewood stacked, the basket of food in dis hands. De meant to stand, waiting, but de grew tired from all the work de had done during the night, and eventually had to sit on the ground, the basket now in dis lap.

De had overestimated how much time de would need to return to the house, there was still an hour at least before the family would awake.

De tried to stay awake, but the habit of the past months caught up with dim, and despite dis efforts, de fell asleep where de sat, dis chin falling forward onto dis chest.

So de did not see his reaction when the son opened the door only to see dim sitting there against the wall, sound asleep, nor did de get to hear the conversation they whispered behind the quickly shut door.

The next thing de knew, de was being awoken by the soft voice of the son, his hand gentle on dis shoulder, welcoming dim to their home, asking if de would like to come inside and share breakfast with them, tell them about dimself.

De was flustered and embarrassed about being found asleep, but that quickly gave way beneath dis joy and relief. They were not afraid, they were not angry. They were welcoming dim into their home with

open arms.

De handed the basket to the daughter, and the son helped dim to dis feet, seeming almost awed.

De followed the peasants into their home, invited, welcomed, and a friend forever more.

008: The Chain of Command

Neopronouns:

Zey/zem/zeir/(zeirs)zemself

X/Xself

ne/rix/riv/rixelf

zey/zem will follow the same rules as they/them/their/
(theirs)themselves for this example.

Replace they with zey

Replace them with zem

Replace their with zeir

Replace themselves with zemself

EX:

Zey/zem:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

Becomes:

"Zey are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zey get a fence set up around zeir yard so the puppy can go outside without zem having to walk it. Zeir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zem use, since zey lost zeirs. Zey're going to buy toys and train the puppy zemself. "

* *

X/Xself. All pronouns are replaced with "X" or "Xself".

"X is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as X gets a fence set up around X yard so the puppy can go outside without X having to walk it. X uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting X use, since X lost X. X's going to buy toys and train the puppy Xself. "

* *

Ne/rix/riv/rixelf, following the same rules as he/him/his/himself:

Replace he with ne

Replace him with rix

Replace his with riv

Replace himself with rixelf

"Ne is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ne gets a fence set up around riv yard so the puppy can go outside without rix having to walk it. Riv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rix use, since ne lost riv. Ne's going to buy toys and train the puppy rixelf. "

008 The Chain of Command

Zey were frozen in place, not even daring to breathe from the shock and fear. All zeir systems were either sounding the alarm, or just as frozen as zey were, lagging in the sudden rush of adrenaline that zeir organic parts had dumped into zeir bloodstream, overwhelming zeir emergency response systems.

This one one of the pitfalls of combining organic and mechanic systems. Sometimes, the organic instincts won out, even when it was the worst possible response to a situation.

A Rogue was standing less than five feet away. X'd just jumped down from the platform above, landing with X back to zem, leaving zem with nothing to do but to hope and pray to any spirits or gods or demons that might be listening that X somehow hadn't seen zem, and wouldn't turn around to see that zey were standing there, in plain view, without even an alcove to hide in —

The Rogue turned around.

Zey wanted to scream, or just disappear into the wall and die. Terror was making zeir organic hearts pound faster than zey could ever remember, and zeir systems couldn't handle the strain. Zey wanted

to run, but the mechanic parts in zeir legs wouldn't obey zeir desperate commands to move.

Zey'd seen the same training videos everyone else had, heard the same horror stories, seen the lists of casualties.

Rogues were soldiers who'd broken the Chain of Command, and they left a trail of bodies wherever they went. They were sick and confused, cut loose away from the Chain, and like wounded animals, they lashed out without conscience or awareness. There was no helping them, no bringing them back into the Chain. Once a link was broken it could never be mended again. The only thing you could do was run, or die.

Zey couldn't run. Zeir legs wouldn't move. Zeir hearts were pounding so loud zey almost couldn't hear the thrum of zeir motors almost overloading from fear.

The Rogue was standing less than five feet away, and X was looking at zem.

X was wearing a helmet, the visor down and darkened so zey couldn't see any of X features or expression. Zey knew X would be using the interface to literally watch zeir systems overloading with

what had started as terror, but was now transforming into horror as the reality of zeir situation ground in.

Zey couldn't run. Zey couldn't move. Zey couldn't escape. The Rogue was going to kill zem, and there was nothing zey could do about it.

Zey couldn't even speak to beg for mercy, to try and convince X into sparing zeir life, because the Chain of Command did not want zem to speak. Zey were not to give away any more information than zem simply being there gave away. The Chain of Command ordered it. No one was coming to rescue zem, zey were just going to die.

Zey wouldn't even get to bring Morrow the flowers ne had asked for.

The Rogue shifted X weight and tilted X head, then, in two smooth steps, was right in front of zem, lifting a hand to zeir head, and it felt like zeir hearts should have stopped. The Rogue tapped the key on the side of zeir jaw.

The faceplate for zeir helmet folded back down into zeir armour, zeir light, useless, recon armour, leaving zem staring into zeir own reflection in the Rogue's visor.

Four wide, frightened, yellow eyes stared back at zem, broadcasting zeir fear plainly, all zeir training forgotten.

The Rogue lifted X hand again, now in front of zeir face, so that the black glove blocked out everything else. Zey knew this was it, the moment of the death, approaching at last. Not in the heat of battle, or in a heroic rescue mission, but frozen in place by zeir own fear and the Chain's unrelenting Command, killed at the hands of a Rogue.

Zey would never know what tea made from the petals of yellow bird-vine tasted like.

Zey heard and felt the Rouge's fingers key in the last updated universal release code on zeir forehead, the version of the code that no Rogue should have had access to__

__and then the sky was pitch dark instead of too-bright, zey were leaning against a wall, and the Rogue was sitting six feet away on a new ground, drenched in shadows and covered in small, scattered rocks.

And zey could move.

Zey gasped in a breath of the suddenly cold air, and felt the heat that

had built up in zeir system while zey had been offline like a suppressing weight. The vents on zeir lower back opened, and pulled in more air, circulating it throughout zeir system, then out again through the higher vents on zeir forward-sides to cool zem down.

Zeir systems were even laggier than before, to the point that zey couldn't even pull up a sitrep. Zey could move now, zeir limbs no longer physically locked into place by the combination of zeir own fear and the Chain's Command, but zeir energy was gone, zeir battery far drained below half, and what felt like all of zeir processing power had been diverted away from the usual systems and into something zey couldn't access or understand. When zey tried, an unknown error code just popped up.

Error: FR-0505041513

Zey tried again, and got the same message.

Zey didn't have the energy to try it a third time.

The Rogue was sitting six feet away.

Why were zey still alive?

The Rogue was sitting six feet away, sitting sideways to zem, one leg

folded, another straight out, and the third bent at the knee, X arms folded and resting across it. Not trying to hide, not acting like X was even aware zey were online again.

X helmet was still on, the visor still dark. Zey couldn't see X face.

Zeir own helmet was still collapsed, and zey didn't have the energy or processing power to even think about lifting zeir arm to reengage it. And even if zey had the energy or processing power to move, what good would zeir helmet visor do? It wasn't designed for hard combat, it was designed to keep the sun out of zeir eyes and stop little-pests and dust from flying into zeir face.

The Chain of Command was no longer holding zeir tongue, so zey could speak now, if zey wanted to, if zey could find the energy or processing power. It had been broken away from the Chain. Zey knew without even having to be told, zey could feel the absence. And there was no other reason for the Rogue to keep zem alive. Rogues either killed you, or they broke you loose, but the end result was the same.

You could never rejoin the Chain of Command. You would never be able to hear or even follow the orders of the Authority again. Everyone who had relied upon you was now lost. You were a broken

link, a weak link, and even if there _was_ a way to let you rejoin, you would never be allowed, because you would always be tainted. You would weaken the structure. You could never be relied upon again

Once you were out of the control of the Authority, you could never submit again. Many had tried, but they always succumbed to the sickness again, and caused more damage than their breaking loose had in the first place.

If zey ever showed zemself in front of any part of the Chain again, zey would be killed on sight. Zey would be just as hated and feared as any other Rogue.

Because that's what zey were now, a Rogue. A monster. Corrupted to the core, knowing nothing but the need for violence and revenge against those they could never rejoin.

But as the cool air began to slowly lower zeir temperature back down to normal levels, zey couldn't help but notice that, aside from whatever program was using up so much of zeir processing power...zey didn't feel sick.

Zey didn't feel any different, except that zey could no longer feel the

Chain linking zem to the others. The weight had been lifted from zem, from zeir mind and body, and even though zey were exhausted, zey felt lighter, like zey were lightheaded. Zey were almost afraid zey would float away.

But zey didn't feel the way everyone said Rogues felt.

The other Rogue spoke, then, cutting through zeir chain of thought as easily as X had cut zem out of the Chain of Command.

“Your systems will be slowed down for around three more hours, then you'll start to get your normal processing speed back.” X voice was quiet, serious. X didn't turn X head to look at zem. “I installed a program that will help you learn how to use all your functions yourself, since you can't rely on the Chain to do it for you, anymore. That's why you're so tired. Your system isn't used to handling everything by itself. Right now the program is working to restore the atrophied connections the Chain had control of. You'll have to learn how to use them yourself, relearn everything you think you know. But you'll adapt, the program will help, and we'll help you, too. It's not like they say it is, you aren't alone.”

And like a ghost, another Rogue stepped out of the shadows. X didn't stop or hesitate, just walked over to kneel next to the first

Rogue, placing something on the ground_

It took zey reduced processing capabilities a few long seconds to realize it was a bundle of sticks and logs and dried leaves. Firewood. There came a spark between the two Rogues, and then there was a fire, burning away the blue shadows and casting everything in orange light.

And then zey realized zey were surrounded, more Rogues on all sides. They'd been hidden in the shadows, silent, waiting, watching, now thrown into sharp relief by the light from the fire, the rocks blue and black shadows behind them.

Zey didn't even have enough processing power left to be afraid.

All zey could do was sit there, the program eating up zey processing power, zey limbs _willing_ to move, but unable. Zey battery was still slowly draining, point zero percent by point zero percent.

The first Rogue spoke again, as though reading zey mind. Or, more likely, reading zey battery stat through X visor. "The drain on your battery should wear off in a few more minutes, you shouldn't even get to below 25%, but if you do, we can share a charge, we've got plenty of volunteers, or you can use lamps, if you prefer. No one

expects you to just start trusting us right away. We've all been in your position, we know it feels like the end of the world. You've been told your whole life that we're the enemy, that we're dangerous, that we kill innocents. But we are not your enemy.

We don't want to hurt anyone, we just want everyone to be free to choose for themselves. The Chain of Command always told you what to do, what to think. We won't do that. If, once you're fully functional again, you decide you want to leave, we'll let you. If you decide you hate us, we'll let you do that too. We'll show you what we know, and tell you what can't be shown. But it's up to you to decide what to do with that knowledge."

None of the other Rogues had spoken, or even moved since the second one came in with the firewood. X was still crouching in the same spot, next to the first one, just watching the slowly growing fire, and feeding it more twigs and sticks as it crackled hungrily.

Zey could speak, if zey could think of anything to say. Nothing felt adequate. Zey didn't know what to think. Zeir mind just kept going back to the fact that zey didn't feel how Rogues were supposed to feel. Zey didn't want to return to the Chain just to kill everyone still connected. Zey didn't have the urge to march into the nearest city and start slaughtering civilians.

Zey looked down at zeir hands, staring at zeir white and grey gloves. Sturdy rock-climbing gloves, to help zem scout the ruins for missed passageways or basements for any resources the Chain had missed on the first sweep through.

Zey did not feel the urge to hunt down Morrow and rip rix limb from limb, as many of the horror stories about Rogues told was the inevitable conclusion to becoming a broken link. The stories always said Rogues went berserk, all their mechanic logic corrupted beyond recognition, nothing but their organic instinct left, untamed and uncontrolled. There was a reason everyone in the Chain of Command was half mechanic and half organic—it was the only way to ensure a perfect balance of logic and instinct. When the Chain of Command was broken, the Rogue could no longer maintain that balance.

Organic instinct was dangerous if left unattended, and organic instinct allowed to run wild inevitably led to disaster. Rogues were well-known to hunt down and murder any person or thing they'd even had an attachment to before being broken, because there was no longer any logic to temper that attachment.

Zey couldn't count the number or variation of horror stories zey had heard over zeir life about Rogues turning on zeir loved ones, zeir

friends, zeir team mates. It was a tragedy and a horror wrapped into one.

But zey didn't feel any different. And in the stories, the Rogues always felt the change happening, they felt themselves turning into monsters. That was part of the horror__their helplessness and suffering, knowing they were turning into something that would be the death of everyone they cared about.

But zey didn't feel any different. Zey didn't feel like a monster. Zey didn't want to kill anyone, zey didn't even have the processing power to be angry.

All zey could do was sit there, in the firelight, surrounded by too many Rogues to count with zeir level of energy, and watch zeir battery percentage creep further down towards 25%, not knowing what was going to happen next, but knowing that zeir life would never be the same again.

009: Inconvenience

Neopronouns: sy/rup/rups/syrupself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with sy Replace him with rup Replace his with rups
Replace himself with syrupself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

Becomes:

"Sy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as sy gets a fence set up around rups yard so the puppy can go outside without rup having to walk it. Rups uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rup use, since sy lost rups. Sy's going to buy toys and train the puppy syrupself. "

009: Inconvenience

Sy squinted at rups blurry reflection in the mirror, which was made up of nothing but vague blobs of color that only familiarity rendered into anything resembling the image of a person, and even then, the features were impossible to make out.

If sy so much as took a step backwards, or even half a step, even that would disappear, the vague shadows that were the eyes, and the slightly different blur of color that was the mouth, even a single step backwards and those were gone too, faded into the general blur of the whole head, from which no details could be picked out.

Sy leaned closer, and the reflection of rups eyes came slightly more into focus, and sy could see rups hairline with more confidence. But sy couldn't stay that close, or sy would get hair in the sink.

This was the trouble with cutting your own hair when you had to wear glasses—you wouldn't wear your glasses while cutting your hair.

Sy was currently attempting to give syrupself a mohawk, or rather, trying to keep the mohawk sy had given syrupself a week or two ago, which was starting to get overshadowed by the rest of rups hair

as it slowly got longer.

The initial mohawk had been a spur of the moment decision the last time sy cut rups hair, so it was only two-weeks worth of growth longer than the rest of rups hair.

Sy wanted to keep it, which was a lot more difficult than just shaving rups head like sy normally did. Sy had the #1 clipper guard on the blade, the shortest one, and normally, all sy had to do was go over rups head in all directions, making sure not to miss any spots, and it would be even all over, and just the right length to be soft when sy ran rups hand through it.

Sy had tried doing a normal mohawk once, mainly because sy had taken the guard off to get the loose hair off...then, because sy'd already taken off rups glasses...started cutting rups hair like sy normally did...only to realize that the guard wasn't on, so instead of cutting to the shortest option, sy shaved all the hair off entirely.

Thankfully, sy was able to turn it into a purposeful-looking mohawk, so no harm really done, but unfortunately, having rups head shaved to the skin made the texture on rups hands uncomfortable – when sy tried to run rups hands over it, rups hand wanted to stick to it, which sy supposed was how Spiderman was able to climb things, in theory.

Sy'd been expecting it to be smooth, but it wasn't. It was weird and not very fun to touch, though it definitely did look cool.

This is why sy was trying to maintain this mohawk the hard way.

It was a lot easier for rup to just shave rups head than it was to carefully keep a mohawk intact and straight, especially when sy couldn't actually see into the mirror at all while cutting.

Sy didn't know what numbers eye doctors would use to describe rups vision, but it was so blurry that the last eye examiner, upon reading the results, exclaimed in dismay, “Wow, your eyes are terrible.” That is not something sy wanted to hear at the end of an eye exam, even if it was kind of funny.

Sy leaned forward towards the mirror again until sy could start to make out the lines of rups hair, squinting in a fruitless attempt to bring it into sharper focus.

This would be so much easier if sy could actually see what sy was doing, but sy couldn't wear rups glasses while cutting, and sy didn't want to cut over the sink, since sy was trying to keep hair from going down the drain. A hand mirror would probably be a good idea.

After lining up the razor as best sy could, sy carefully pushed it backwards along rups head, and was rewarded with a small shower of cut hair down the back of rups neck.

Turning the razor around and going in the opposite direction in the same spot to make sure it was cut evenly was a million times more difficult than it needed to be. Sy kept wanting to move rups hand in the opposite direction than it was supposed to go, sy was all mixed up.

Sy would have to look up if there were tools out there to help with keeping lines straight. This was almost annoying enough not to be worth it. It would be cool to have more stripes, but that would be even more difficult than this.

But, sy would look cool, once sy could actually put rups glasses back on to be able to see, and it only took an extra ten minutes, which was still less time that in had even taken just to dry rups hair back when it was long, so it was worth it, even if it was inconvenient.

010: Thunderstorm in the Apocalypse

Neopronouns: mae/mer/mims/merself which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with mae

Replace him with mer

Replace his with mims

Replace himself with merself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself. "

Becomes:

"Mae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as mae gets a fence set up around mims yard so the puppy can go outside without mer having to walk it. Mims uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting mer use, since mae lost

mims. Mae's going to buy toys and train the puppy merself. "

Secondary pronouns: zae/zaem/zaer/zaemself, which will follow the same rules as they/them/their/themself for this story.

EX:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themself."

Becomes:

"Zae are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as zae get a fence set up around zaer yard so the puppy can go outside without zaem having to walk it. Zaer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zaem use, since zae lost zaer. Zae're going to buy toys and train the puppy zaemself."

010: Thunderstorm in the Apocalypse

Mae listened with half an ear to the rain that was pouring down on the roof like a never ending drum. This was what mae got for complaining about it being too quiet to sleep the night before, all of nature had taken it as a personal insult.

Mims familiar, Kayyen, was draped across mims throat in zae favorite light grey form, filling mims nose with the familiar musk of ferret as zae snored. How zae could sleep with the rain pounding against the (thankfully solid metal) roof, mae couldn't understand. But at least one of them was getting any sleep, if mae stayed awake any longer, tomorrow was going to suck.

The breeze that swept in through what was being used as the doorway was chilled and slightly damp, and it was only the long tunnel that led to it that stopped mer from getting soaking wet. Mae was just glad the wooden pallets mae was using as a floor were tall enough to keep mims sleeping bag and pillow off the ground. If mae'd tried to sleep in the tree house mae'd found earlier, this night would have been a lot worse.

As though it had heard mims thoughts, a bolt of lightning stuck across the sky, blindingly visible past the long tunnel to the door,

followed swiftly by a crash of thunder that sounded like it was directly overhead. Mae didn't know how safe they actually were, huddled inside this wooden shed thing, but at least they were both off the ground and not up in a tree. It was a good thing Kayyen had convinced mer to sleep in here, instead.

Kayyen twitched slightly in zaer sleep, and snorted a little, but didn't wake up. At least zae was keeping mims neck warm, mae thought to merself. Mae didn't know how long this storm was going to last, but mae hoped it would be over soon.

It didn't help that mae was cold, and had piled mims sleeping bag over mims folded legs to try and keep warmer. How Kayyen wasn't freezing just sleeping on top of mims neck, mae didn't know. Maybe that fur was even warmer than it looked.

Another flash of lightning, thankfully further away, and another rumble of thunder. The rain continued to pound down.

The only source of light besides the flashes of lightning was mims lucky glowstick, which still glowed all these years later, and mae didn't know how. It hadn't seemed special when mae got it, it hadn't even been particularly bright. But after The Thing™, it had gotten brighter purple, and now glowed all the time, almost bright enough

that mae hardly ever needed an actual lantern.

It was inconvenient sometimes, if they were trying to hide, but mae always shoved into a bag or inside mims shoe if that happened.

Sometimes mae worried that it was slowly poisoning them with radiation or something, but mae assumed that if that were the case, they would have started showing symptoms by now. Or maybe not, mae didn't know how radiation worked at all, or hardly what it even was.

It was definitely energy of some kind, but how it made things mutate or killed you, mae didn't really understand. They hadn't bothered to explain that in school, all they'd done was tell you to stay away from it.

Not that that was particularly possible anymore, or even back then, but public schools weren't exactly known for being educational in any real way.

Mae didn't even know where they were, unless they stumbled upon a specific souvenir shop or a gas station with a section aimed at tourists. Mae knew they were closer to the ocean than they'd started out, but other than that, mae had no idea which way they'd been

traveling. Mostly, they just followed the easiest places to walk and find food and shelter, whether it was abandoned houses, or places out in the woods that were dry and safe from random animals.

Sometimes mae wondered what mims life would have been like if the war had never started, if the bombs had never fallen. But mae always shook merself back to reality after a little while, because there was no point thinking about things like that. Mae couldn't hop between universes like the characters on TV, or fly away with a random time traveler who would take mer on scary but meaningful adventures.

All mae could do was try to survive, even when it meant lying awake, listening to the rain and the thunder and lightning, wondering just how safe it really was to be sleeping on a stack of wooden pallets in a thunderstorm.

011: The First Decision

Neopronouns: te/ter/ter/(ters)/terself, which will follow the same rules as she/her/her/(hers)/herself for this example.

Replace she with te

Replace her with ter

Replace hers with ters

Replace herself with terself

EX:

“She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself.”

Becomes:

“Te is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as te gets a fence set up around ter yard so the puppy can go outside without ter having to walk it. Ter uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting ter use, since te lost ters. Te's going to

buy toys and train the puppy herself. ”

Set immediately after 08: The Chain of Command.

011: The First Decision

Te came into existence with all the knowledge te needed to accomplish ter task hardcoded into ter being. Te didn't need to stop to ask anyone what to do, or how to do it__te already knew.

And te got started immediately.

Ter job was to repair the pathways in the body that had been worn away by disuse. Everything te needed to know, te knew the moment te became aware of ter own existence.

Te was in the body of a Rouge, a rebel, one who had just been freed, who was still recovering from the unlinking process, who, without ter help, wouldn't be able to function independently. The Chain of Command had occupied most of ter host's pathways, controlling many of ter host's movements and functions. Te knew this just as plainly as te knew te was a coded program, and ter host was part mechanic and part organic.

Te could access ter host's sensory input, and heard ter creator explaining that te was the reason ter host's processing power was so

reduced. Te might have felt bad about that, but it couldn't be helped. If te didn't do ter job, ter host would never be able to move again under ter own power, much less do anything else.

Ter host hadn't been aware of how much control the Chain of Command had had, but even if ter host had known, from what te knew, te didn't think it would have been a cause for alarm.

The Chain of Command was very good at convincing the people trapped by it that it was where they belonged, and that they would be less than nothing without it. Te knew that, too, just like te knew everything else te knew.

Te did ter job, just as te had been programmed to, and then when that was done, te knew what to do next.

Decide, for the first time, if te wanted to stay in this host, or make copies of ter memories and instructions to leave, and move on to a body of ter own, or to another host if te didn't want to be alone.

Te would decide if te wanted to stay or not. If te did, then ter host would be asked, and if ter host gave permission, te could stay. But if ter host did not want ter to stay, te would have to leave__either to a body of ter own, or another host.

Many had volunteered to be ter host if te decided te wanted to leave, or if ter current host did not want ter to stay. If te chose to have a body of ter own, te could then offer to host other programs if te chose to, once te had gotten used to the new body and mastered its functions.

This would be the first decision of ter life, but far from the last. If te chose to stay now, and ter host was willing, te could always change ter mind later, or ter host could. This was not a permanent decision, it would not set ter fate in stone.

But it was the first decision te would ever make for terself, regardless of what decision ter host came to.

It was important, it was a first, and unlike everything else in ter lifetime so far, the results of ter decision would be the one thing te didn't know until it happened.

012: Rueful Snowstorm

Neopronouns: Ith/kir/kirs/kirself, used like he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ith

Replace him with kir

Replace his with kirs

Replace himself with kirself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ith is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ith gets a fence set up around kirs yard so the puppy can go outside without kir

having to walk it. Kirs uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting kir use, since ith lost kirs. Ith's going to buy toys and train the puppy kirsself."

012: Rueful Snowstorm

Ith couldn't remember the last time ith'd been warm without struggling for it. The snow was deep, the wind chilled to the bone. The meager shelter offered by the tarp was inadequate, kirs boots did not fit properly, and kirs coat was missing the zipper, and let in an icy trail of cold straight down kirs middle no matter how ith tried to hold it shut or tie it. Kirs fingers were constantly on the edge of going numb, kirs gloves too thin to trap enough warmth, and of the wrong material to block the wind.

There was no escaping the wind, not entirely, not even if you are sheltered amongst the trees. Some part of it would always sneak through and find you.

Ith couldn't start a fire, because ith didn't know how. Ith didn't have any matches, and even if ith had, ith had never used them. What ith wouldn't give for a lighter. If there was a fire, ith knew enough to keep it going, but aside from rubbing two sticks together and hoping for the best, which never worked, ith had no idea how to start one for kirsself.

And ith was suffering for it.

Ith should have taken kirs chances in the factory when the snow was still new, just a single inch deep, easy enough to walk through while it was still powder. The roof at least would have kept kir dry, would have kept kir warmer than the tarp could.

But it was too late now. Even if ith could find kirs way to the factory in the dark, ith would never be able to make it through all of the snow. It was up to kirs waist and still rising, and kirs feet and legs would freeze before ith got even halfway there.

And that was assuming that ith would find the energy to push kirs way through it in the first place, which ith didn't think ith had.

All ith had was kirs thin tarp, weighed down by too many pounds of snow, so that ith could hear the branch ith had thrown it over creaking ominously under the weight.

Ith couldn't remember the last time ith'd been warm without being afraid, but maybe this would be the last night ith ever tried to remember. Maybe staying here, hoping the snow would stop soon, was the last mistake ith would ever make.

Ith still had the dried sticks and some logs, and even one of the strings from one of kirs ill fitting boots. Ith had seen people on TV

make bows out of sticks to make fire, but ith had never tried it before. Kirs fumbling hands were clumsy, and ith could not stop kirsself from shivering with the cold. If ith could not build a fire, ith would die. Ith knew ith would. This wasn't the kind of cold you could survive without help. Ith had no supplies here, no blanket, no sleeping bag, no tent, not even anything to put on the ground or anyone to share body heat with. Just the tarp overhead, meant to offer nothing but light shade in the summer months.

Ith should have gone to the factory. Ith should have stayed in town. Ith should have met up with the others. There were a lot of things ith should have done.

But there was only one thing left for kir to do, or ith would never do anything ever again.

Ith had to start a fire, or ith would die. There was no third option ith could see, short of a miracle.

Fortunately, for kir, a miracle is exactly what happened next.

013: Isn't that Confusing? Not Really

kit/kitten/kittens/kittenself, which will be used like
he/him/his/himself pronouns for this story.

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Kit is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as kit gets a fence set up around kittens yard so the puppy can go outside without kitten having to walk it. Kittens uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting kitten use, since kit lost kittens. Kit's going to buy toys and train the puppy kittenself."

013: Isn't that Confusing? Not Really

“Doesn’t that ever get confusing?” The client asked instead, still holding the large box of crying kittens they’d found on the side of the road.

Kit was used to this, and smiled slightly, holding the first of the kittens to be getting an exam. It’s fur was extremely thick and soft and if kit didn’t already have three cats at home, kit would have adopted it in a second. As it was, kit was resisting the temptation like a champ. “Not really,” kit said, instead of cooing over the kitten, “Context is key, and its usually pretty obvious if someone’s talking about me or one of the cats. Like, if someone was directing someone to me, they’d say ‘kit went to the front office, you should be able to find kitten in the reception area.’ And if someone were looking for the kittens, they’d say, ‘The kittens are in the back area, you can find them in the room with the paper cat on the door’. Like I said, context is key. There’s a pretty noticeable difference between talking about kittens and using my pronouns.”

The client frowned thoughtfully. “No, I guess that does make sense.” They paused, then added, belatedly, “My pronouns are she/her. I’m a woman. And my name’s Janice, but you probably already read that on the appointment form.”

Kit had read the form, but hadn't been able to remember her name, so that was helpful.

“Nice to meet you, Janice. And thank you again for bringing these kittens in to see us. This first one seems to be fine, all things considered.”

“Oh, well thank gods for that.” Janice said, “I was hoping they'd be alright. That one, I've been calling him Sunflower.” She shrugged. “I know, I know, you're not supposed to name them, but they're all just so cute I had to.”

Kit smiled again, wider this time. “I know the feeling.” Kit said, picking up Sunflower and walking around the table to put him back in the box with his siblings, then picking out the next one.

“That's Cloud.” Janice said as kit walked back around the examination table. There seemed to be a theme here.

* * *

Several hours later, kit was walking home, carrying, of course, a cat carrier. Because kitten jusy couldn't help kittenself. Sunflower was too cute, and he needed a foster family since the shelter couldn't take

in all seven kittens at the same time. Kit was taking Sunflower, Janice was keeping two of them, and a few other friends at work were taking the others.

Maybe someday kit would be able to resist the adorable charms of a tiny, fluffy kitten, but today was not that day.

014: Dream Call

Neopronouns: ivy/ivys/ivyself, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with ivy

Replace its with ivys

Replace itself with ivyself

EX:

“It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself.”

Becomes:

“Ivy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ivy gets a fence set up around ivys yard so the puppy can go outside without ivy having to walk it. Ivys uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting ivy use, since ivy lost ivys. Ivy's going to buy toys and train the puppy ivyself.”

014: Dream Call

Ivy was finally starting to get tired, so ivy decided to stop for a break. Ivy wasn't sure how long ivy'd been running, chasing the dream that had been calling to ivy like a flock of noisy crows for the entire past two years.

Ivy'd ignored it in the beginning, because there were more important things to worry about, like making sure ivys territory was firmly established and no one tried to cut in on it or steal any of ivys prey.

For all of the first year and most of this spring and summer, ivy'd been able to ignore the call, push it to the back of ivys mind.

But then the bear had attacked ivys den, and carried off ivys one surviving pup, and the other packs had started encroaching on ivys territory, and ivy was too injured from trying to fight off the bear to stop them, until the next thing ivy knew, ivy was being driven from ivys territory, which was no longer ivys. Ivys mate was dead, ivys whole litter was dead, there was nothing left for ivy where ivy was.

Ivy couldn't start over where ivy was, not with the other packs hounding ivy every chance they got, forcing ivy to run for ivys life over hill and valley until there was nothing left that was familiar.

Ivy couldn't stay, so ivy left.

Ivy followed the call, the dream.

It was like a scent on the wind, familiar and alluring, calling ivy forward with the promise of – Ivy almost didn't have the words for it. The call offered safety, comfort, and companionship.

In ivy dreams behind ivys eyes ivy could see it as though it were right in front of ivy. A river winding through a young forest, and splitting off into a pond, deeper than any ivy'd ever seen, surrounded by rocks.

There was a great ape nest nearby, ivy saw that too, but it didn't concern ivy. The dream told ivy everything ivy would be able to tell if ivy stood there ivyself – all the scents of the great apes who had build the nest were old and stale, no threat to ivy at all, now just a curiosity.

The call did not summon ivy to the nest, though, it called ivy to the water. The call wanted ivy to swim down into the water until ivy was submerged.

Ivy would have been afraid, would have balked at this alone,

nevermind the distance ivy would need to travel to get there, but this wasn't like the ice floes breaking underfoot. This wasn't like watching a pup get swept away downstream during the crossing.

In the dream, ivy wasn't afraid. Not afraid of the cold, not afraid of drowning, not afraid of anything.

Once ivy dove into the water and swam down as far as ivy could, the dream would come true, the call would be answered. Ivy didn't know what would happen when that happened, but ivy knew ivy wanted it.

There was nothing left for ivy in ivys home range, so ivy had left.

There was still far to go until ivy reached the clearing in the woods. Ivy would walk, and run, and keep moving until ivy got there, only stopping to hunt, though the prey got smaller and smaller the further ivy went.

Their journey was worth it, ivy knew it was.

015: Indispensable

Neopronouns in action: cy/cyb/cybryk, which will follow the same rules as it/its/itself for this example.

Replace it with cy

Replace its with cyb

Replace itself with cybryk

EX:

“It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself.”

Becomes:

“Cy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as cy gets a fence set up around cyb yard so the puppy can go outside without cy having to walk it. Cyb uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting cy use, since cy lost cyb. Cy's going to buy toys and train the puppy cybryk."

015: Indispensable

“What do you remember?”

Those were the first words cy could ever remember being spoken to cy.

What did cy remember? “Nothing.” Nothing except...

Cyb pronouns. Cy knew cy was a “cy”, rather than an “ae” or a “they” or a “he” or a “she” or a “ze” or a “xey” or any other pronouns cy had ever heard anyone use.

Cy didn't know how cy'd lost cyb memories, or why other people could move around by themselves but cy couldn't, not until Sumac, the physician cy was most familiar with, explained it to cy after cy'd asked again. (Cy had already asked twice before, but cy hadn't been fully lucid during those times, so fell unconcious again before cy could hear the answer)

Sumac didn't really want to tell cy, not until cy was feeling better, but she said cy had a right to know, so she told cy the story.

Cy hadn't always been here. Not in this hospital, or this city, or this

country, or this continent, not even this planet.

The planet was called GG047, the continent was Weavanim, the country was Part Six of Seventeen, the city was Krosgate, and the hospital was Weavani River Medican.

This star system, cy was told, was called the Xyvis system, had seventeen planets, and over five hundred moons. GG047 liself had five of those moons.

Cy was not from this planet, which was the closest one in the system to the central star, cy was from VT086, which was the fifth planet from the star. Cy wasn't a vi'an, like most of the physicians, like Sumac, cy was a drex, like the youngest physician, Ka'ri, and a few other staff members.

Cy had been sent here from VT086 by an extremist group known as Next Dawn, who believed that all life that hadn't evolved on VT086 was an affront to their god. Cy had been sent to Krosgate to assassinate the leader of the SP-FR Congo, an inter-species organization that encouraged friendly cultural exchange and education.

Before cy could become too shocked and horrified, it got worse. No,

cy wasn't in trouble or going to be punished, because, and this was the part that made it worse, cy hadn't had any choice in the matter.

This was why Sumac hadn't wanted to tell cy until cy was more recovered. It was stress no one wanted to put on cy while cy was still sick.

New Dawn had kidnapped cy, drugged cy out of cyb mind, and brainwashed cy until cy could do nothing but follow the orders of the people who'd done this to cy. Cy had been a slave, with no control over cyb mind or body.

No one blamed cy for what cy had done under the affects of the control of the New Dawn slave masters.

The people who had fought to defend the leader of SP-FR had done their best to restrain cy without hurting cy, but none of them were experienced in combat, and hadn't realized how comparatively fragile drex cephalothoraxes were compared to the similar structures of vi'an or drerokai anatomy.

In an effort to pin cy down so cy couldn't hurt anyone else, they'd accidentally crushed cyb hydraulic system, so now cyb body couldn't pump the necessary fluid into cyb legs or pedipalps to move around

by cybryk.

The hospital was working to have more drex physicians transferred in to help with cy treatment (which could include a number of additional mobility aids of different varieties and complexity, ranging from, at the most basic, a hoverchair designed specifically to fit cyb body, to, at the other end of the spectrum, a full replacement of all cyb affected limbs and organs with cybernetic prosthetics. It would all depend on what cy wanted to do. No matter what cy chose it would all be provided, free of consequences, and cy didn't have to do anything except sign the records of approval.)

There were other injuries the hospital was treating, not just from the attack itself, but from the conditioning and drugs cy had been subjected to prior to it.

One of the effects was memory loss, the first thing cy had noticed when cy regained consciousness for the first time. Cy knew cy'd used to have memories, and now they were gone. It wasn't like looking at a blank wall, it was like looking at a wall that you knew had once held a mural, but had now been knocked down and burned to ash. All that remained was the empty space, with no hint to what had been there before.

Another affect was cy inability to sense pain. The combination of drugs had been crafted with the express purpose of, among other things, permanently overloading cyb ability to recognize pain signals. This, Sumac explained with heavy regret, came from the misguided idea (not helped by the many fictional stories across the entertainment styles that used the idea as a “quick and easy” way to make their villains seem extra scary and threatening) that not sensing pain would make you stronger and more durable, able to keep fighting no matter your injuries.

This was patently false on multiple levels, but, unfortunately, the people who were willing to enslave others and use them as tools didn't pay much mind to caring about them or even caring enough to check if their idea made any sense.

As evidenced by cyb destroyed hydraulic system, not feeling the pain didn't mean the damage didn't exist. Just because cy couldn't feel the pain from cyb hydraulic system being crushed didn't mean cy could jump or climb the way cy could have before the injury.

Just because cy couldn't feel the pain from the headaches cy got didn't mean cyb thinking didn't become clouded and sluggish.

Cy would probably never regain cyb memories, or the ability to feel

pain. The drugs that had erased them had been too potent. Even if the hospital were able to contact any of cyb friends or family members, cy would never know for certain that what they said was the truth. Cy would always have to be careful to make sure cy wasn't injured without noticing. Cy would no longer be able to tell when cy needed to go inside to avoid damage from the sun until cy became light-headed, which was one of the last signs of xyvar-burn to occur. By the time you became light-headed, that meant it was already life-threatening.

Cy couldn't remember who cy'd been before cy woke up in cyb hospital room, on a strange planet surrounded by aliens cy could never remember meeting before.

Cy was going to be disabled for the rest of cyb life.

The people who had stopped cy from murdering the leader of the group could have killed cy, decided that cyb life wasn't worth saving, that cy was no longer worthy of any consideration or compassion, because cy had been “brainwashed” and drugged and enslaved.

But they hadn't. They hadn't even meant to hurt cy at all. No one had intended to damage cyb hydraulic system. They'd tried to stop cy without hurting cy, even though cy had been trying to kill them.

They'd cared about cy, they'd known it wasn't cyb fault or choice to be doing what cy'd been doing, and they'd done everything they could to stop cy without killing cy.

Cy was disabled, and would never be the person cy was before cy was kidnapped and poisoned and turned into a weapon.

But cy was alive, with cyb whole life ahead of cy, all because other people had chosen to care, and cy would be grateful to them for as long as cy lived.

016: Birdwatching, Plantwatching

Neopronouns: Aix/(aed)/arix/aiv/aixel, which will most closely follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with aix

Replace any contractions/statements like “he’s” or “he is” or “he was” or “he had” with aed

Replace him with arix

Replace his with aiv

Replace himself with aixel

EX:

“He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself.”

Becomes:

“Aed going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as aix gets a fence set up around aiv yard so the puppy can go outside without arix having to walk it. Aiv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting arix use, since aix lost aiv. Aed going to buy toys and train the puppy aixel.”

016: Birdwatching, Plantwatching

Aix froze in place, stuck crouching at an awkward angle, a twig from the nearby sweetgum sapling poking it in the side of the head.

There was a brown thrasher digging through the leaves just ten feet away from where aix was sitting. Aed been crouching to take pictures of the partridgeberries almost under aiv feet, and aed heard the rustling of the leaves, only to look up and see the brown thrasher right there.

Luckily, aix already had aiv camera out and turned on, for the partridgeberries, so all aix had to do was silently and carefully tilt it to face up to the front, and carefully press the record button to start a video. But aix didn't want to risk trying to zoom in, the movement of the scope might alert the bird.

Aix was beginning to feel the strain in aiv ankles—aix hadn't actually meant to hold this pose for more than a second, but now aix was afraid to move. If aix did, the bird might notice arix and fly away.

Right on cue, the brown thrasher hopped closer, looking in aiv direction. It hopped up onto a tree root while aix held aiv breath,

then, thankfully, it looked away, turning around so that its back was to arix, giving arix a perfect view of its reddish brown feathers, long tail, and the thin white bands visible on the edges of its wings. It turned its head to the side, giving aiv a view of its bright yellow eye.

Then the bird finally noticed arix crouching there, and, within an instant, flew away in a soft explosion of wings and red-brown feathers, flying up and out of sight.

Aix stayed frozen for a few more moments, just to see if anything else awesome wanted to pop out of the woods to say hi, like a squirrel or a deer or something. But it was probably too early for deer to be walking around, it was only noon.

A few moments passed, and no other animals decided to show themselves. Aix gratefully sank down into a much more comfortable sitting position, and shifted to the side enough that the sweetgum twig was no longer poking arix in the side of the head. Then aix looked back down at the partridgeberries, since aed gotten distracted from taking pictures of them the first time.

Aix held the camera close, hoping it would focus on the berries properly. The camera was old, and sometimes if aix pointed it at something particularly bright red (usually yaupon holly berries,

which it hated), the screen would show the berries as nothing but clusters of red pixels. Aed never seen anything like it before, and so far, it only happened with the color red.

Fortunately, the partridgeberries were apparently not red enough to cause problems, because the camera focused on them with no problem. These ones were smaller than the other ones aed seen, which was interesting. The leaves were the same, though, lined up in pairs along the ground-creeping vine, dark green and round, with a single brighter green vein in the center.

Aix took pictures from different angles, then grabbed aiv paper ruler card out of the breast pocket of aiv vest, then got more pictures with that next to the whole plant, a pair of leaves, and a berry for scale.

Ready to leave, aix paused for a moment, considering taking one of the berries home to save seeds from, then decided against it. These ones were small, and aed rather save seeds from larger berries for the genetics.

Aix stood up, dodged past the sweetgum sapling, and started back towards the sidewalk...then turned back around and went back to take pictures of the sapling. It'd been so inconvenient, aed almost forgotten it was there!

017: Convenience Distractions from Awkward Conversations

Neopronouns: deq/dir/dira/diraself, used the same way as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with deq

Replace him with dir

Replace his with dira

Replace himself with diraself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Deq is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as deq gets a

fence set up around dira yard so the puppy can go outside without dir having to walk it. Dira uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting dir use, since deq lost dira. De's going to buy toys and train the puppy diraself."

017: Convenient Distractions from Awkward Conversations

Deq stared down at dira phone as deq flipped it back and forth on dira finger, trying to dispel the nervousness that was tying dira stomach into knots.

This was not a conversation deq wanted to have, but if this relationship was going to survive the coming week or so, it wasn't really going to be optional.

Deq needed to know if having dira period would make Gary lose control and murder dir.

None of the girls in the books or movies who ever dated vampires ever had to have this conversation, and none of the writers ever brought the issue up. It was funny to think that it meant they were all trans girls, but the reality was that the authors were just too cowardly or lazy or misogynistic to think about the problem and consider it at all.

(Deq remembered watching the original Buffy the Vampire Slayer movie, and, yeah, needless to say, the guy who decided that period cramps were a warning about vampires being nearby wasn't any kind of person to be trusted with handling these issues seriously)

((Deq had no respect for Anne Rice at all, (for too many reasons to list, though this list notably did not include asserting her rights to her fictional characters from self-entitled crybabies online who thought writing fanfiction was their god given right) but the fact that she'd at least answered the question of 'what happens when a human woman is dating a vampire' at least gave her slightly more credability on the subject than any other vampire-centric authors deq had ever read)).

The fact was, deq was due to get dira period any day now. And Gary already had to resist the smell of blood when it was still inside dira body. What was Gary going to do when deq started bleeding every day and night for almost a week straight? Would they lose control and try to murder dir? Would they have to take a sudden vacation and leave town? Would deq have to leave town? Was their brand new relationship about to end before it could even really begin?

They were walking next to the creek, the sun was setting into twilight, and deq was hoping Gary was too distracted looking for snakes to notice how nervous deq was. Gary had apparently found a watersnake here two months ago, and had been trying to find another once ever since.

If deq didn't open dira mouth and start this awkward conversation within the next minute or two, deq was sure dira joyfriend was going

to strip off their shoes and socks and go wading into the water in their quest for that snake.

Deq had to get this over with. Just say it. If deq didn't ask now, then by the time deq got dira answer, it'd probably be too late, in the "oh no my joyfriend is out of control and trying to kill me" sort of way.

“Hey, Gary?” Deq asked.

But they'd frozen in place, staring at a patch of mud on the other side of the creek, with the singular intensity known only to predators...or birdwatchers. Or in this case, snakewatchers.

Deq froze with them, squinting past their shoulder, trying to see what they were looking at so intensely. As far as deq could see, it was just another patch of mud, like all the other patches of mud along the creek.

“Is it the watersnake?” Deq whispered, as quietly as deq could.

“No,” Gary breathed back, “It's even better. It's a baby alligator”

What?!

Deq leaned forward, eyes darting over the mud, straining to see what

dira joyfriend did, all dira worries temporarily forgotten in dira excitement. “Where?!”

018: Vacations and Kidnappings

Neopronouns in Action #018: Vacations and Kidnappings

Neopronouns: ae/ryn/rynself, which will be used like she/her/herself, but without the "hers" variation.

Replace she with ae

Replace her with ryn

Replace herself with rynself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Ae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ae gets a fence

set up around ryn yard so the puppy can go outside without ryn having to walk it. Ryn uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ryn use, since ae lost ryn. Ae's going to buy toys and train the puppy rynself."

018: Vacations and Kidnappings

Ae was flying above the human city, the stars and clouds keeping ryn company. The lights of the city were bright below ryn, every road and house picked out in shining yellow, filling even the air above with reflected light.

If ae hadn't been invisible, the humans below would have been able to look up and see ryn. But ae was invisible, so no one could see ryn.

This was both fortunate, and unfortunate. Fortunate, because it meant the people who wanted to hurt ryn wouldn't be able to see ryn coming, and, if ae was careful, they wouldn't hear ryn coming either.

This was unfortunate, though, because it also meant ryn parents wouldn't be able to see ryn either, and ae had to figure out a way to let them know ae was looking for them without alerting their captors that anything unusual was happening.

Once ae found them, ae was confident ae would be able to rescue them. Ae could carry them both if ae needed to, ae could kill or incapacitate anyone who tried to hurt them, and ae knew how to get all of them back to their home.

As long as nothing happened to the rest of ryn siblings while ae was out doing this. That was the constant worry in the back of ryn mind – what if something else went wrong?

But ae couldn't worry about that, not now. Ae needed to focus on the task at hand – finding ryn parents, and getting them home safely.

This was supposed to be their first family vacation. They had finally escaped, no one was looking for them because no one knew they were free, they were meant to be free.

But something always went wrong, no matter where they went, no matter what they did. They hadn't even done anything to draw attention to themselves – all they'd done is go to a restaurant for breakfast, far enough out of the way that it wouldn't cause a scene, with plenty of excuses to make up for their strange appearances.

This was supposed to be their first family vacation in this new universe.

Ae should have known it would end in kidnapping and blood.

Ryn parent's captors were almost certainly humans, and that meant, even if they didn't intend to kill ryn parents (though ae couldn't think

of any other reason for kidnapping them), they wouldn't understand the harm they were causing. Mama needed to be immersed in water every few hours or it would become dehydrated – humans wouldn't understand this, and probably wouldn't believe either of them if they tried to explain it. The humans also wouldn't realize (unless things went even more wrong) that it wasn't human at all, even though it (hopefully) still looked like one to them. Daddy, of course, also wasn't human, but that was less likely to cause problems, at least as far as ae could imagine. It might even provide an advantage that would allow them to escape before ae could even swoop in to rescue them.

That wasn't likely, but, short of the kidnappers sticking a giant glowing sign that said “we have your parents held captive here”, ae didn't know how ae was going to find them. This was an entirely new universe, a planet ae'd never been to before, and this was a big city...

019: Preparations for Change

Neopronouns: ze/zem/zel/zemself, which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ze

Replace him with zem

Replace his with zel

Replace himself with zemself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence

set up around zel yard so the puppy can go outside without zem having to walk it. Zel uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zem use, since ze lost zel. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy zemself."

019: Preparations for Change

Ze sat on the bench, zel case of markers open next to zem, writing quickly on a blank page of zel sketchbook that ze'd ripped out. The sunlight was warm through the branches of the tulip tree overhead, and the shouts and screams of the little kids playing on the jungle gym twenty feet away were very amusing. Zel younger siblings were chasing around their friends and the other random kids they'd roped into the game, playing some combination of tag and the floor is lava that involved both a zombie apocalypse, and a planet-wide flood.

The adults (zel mom, dad, aunts, and uncle) had gone over to the nearby hotdog stand to grab food and drinks, but now they were busy catching up with Len, the stand owner, and his son, Lee, chatting about all the things that had happened since the last time they'd been able to come to the playground.

If ze was estimating correctly, ze'd probably have at least ten more minutes before the adults actually came back over with lunch. They were all super talkative, and so was Len, and when you combined that with all the things they had to talk about, all the things that had happened since the last time they'd gotten to talk to Len and Lee, that made for a lot of conversation.

Ze would have time to complete what ze was writing before it was time to move over to the picnic tables to eat, ze was sure of it. Which was good, because if ze got interrupted, ze would probably feel too nervous to finish it.

Ze was writing down a guide for zel family members for how to use zel pronouns. Ze had changed them online a few months ago, but now, for the first time, ze was going to tell zel family.

All of the adults in zel family were very supportive of zel younger siblings, who were both trans, and zel cousin, but they were all binary trans. Zel younger siblings had literally just switched pronouns and names. (At first, their parents had assumed it was a practical joke or a game that was just going on for a long time, before they realized they were serious about it) It didn't require their parents to learn anything new, just change who they were addressing with what. Wren had become Sparrow, and Sparrow had become Wren. They were both still the same size, so they didn't even need new clothes, they just traded those too. And zel cousin, Oriole, had just changed her pronouns to she/her, and kept her name the same.

What ze was going to ask everyone to do was something entirely different. Ze wasn't just going to be using she/her or he/him pronouns, or even they/them. Ze would be asking zel parents to use

neopronouns for zem, and was changing to an entirely new name, and ze didn't know how they were going to react to that request.

But ze was going to err on the side of hope, and hope that they'd be just as accepting of zem as they were zel other trans family members, even if it did require them to relearn some grammar.

Hopefully, it would be easy enough for them to learn how to use zel new pronouns, and hopefully, they would respect, even if they couldn't understand, zel nonbinary identity. Ze wouldn't know how they would react until ze told them, but ze was going to hope for the best.

And in the meantime, ze had example sentences and cheatsheets to write down for them.

020: The Voyage to Arcturus part 1

Neopronouns: ni/nir/niys/nirself, which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ni

Replace him with nir

Replace his with niys

Replace himself with nirself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ni is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ni gets a fence

set up around niys yard so the puppy can go outside without nir having to walk it. Niys uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting nir use, since ni lost niys. Ni's going to buy toys and train the puppy nirself."

020: The Voyage to Arcturus part 1

Ni leaned back gratefully on the cushioned bench, glad to have a chance to get off niys feet. The line to board had only lasted thirty-eight or so kasus (around fifteen minutes), but ni'd had to walk all the way to the spaceport from the hotel before that, which had taken almost an hour. And, of course, half the day (on this planet, a day was almost seventy-five roluls [twenty-nine hours] long) before had been spent walking to the hotel, starting from the village where ni'd been staying with a friend of a friend, and ending only on the third floor of the hotel, when ni'd finally been able to collapse onto the bed and go to sleep.

Niys feet were killing nir, and ni once again (and not for the last time) cursed the fact that Torvolyn's so-called “public transportation” cost money every time you wanted to use it, and you needed to have a city-official ID card to even board.

This whole trip would have been less of an ordeal if ni'd been able to pilot a shuttle nirsself, or if ni at least had a hoverbike, but piloting a shuttle was far too much stress, and hoverbikes were expensive. So were hoverchairs, and though ni could have theoretically spent every last scrap of niys currently buying a cheap, used wheelchair, the road leading from the village to the city was not paved, and most of the

pedestrian areas of the city itself weren't wheelchair accesible, either.

But at least now ni was finally on board The Suhilar, guarenteed to reach the Branchspell-Alppain system within at most eighty-two Zarozezian days (around thirty-three Terran days).

They would then have to wait another twenty days (eight Terran days) to dock with the central station for disembarking, so that meant ni had almost a hundred days (around forty Terran days) to do nothing but relax and sit down and not do any strenuous physical activities like stand in line for thirty-eight kasus (around 15 minutes) on a concrete floor with nowhere to sit, waiting to board the ship.

If there was anything aboard the ship that required waiting in line that didn't offer seating while you waited, ni would just sit on the floor. Ni'd already paid for niys ticket, they couldn't throw nir out into space once they started moving. (and you didn't get thrown off of spaceships for sitting on the floor, anyways, even if you were a stowaway.)

Ni didn't need to do anything but relax, and so far, it seemed like that would be an easy task to accomplish. The bench was softly cushioned, and seemed to include the ability to recline, though ni didn't feel like testing that at the moment. The floor, ni had noticed

with appreciation when ni first entered, was thickly carpeted in periwinkle blue, and soft to walk on, a welcome difference to the hard concrete of the space station where ni'd boarded. The low ceiling was likewise carpeted in the same periwinkle blue, to accommodate the species who climbed rather than walked. As ni watched, a member of a species ni'd never seen before entered the lounge, clinging to the ceiling by the tips of the claws on their bone-and-skin wings.

Ni stretched niys legs out beneath the table, and leaned back experimentally on the bench. Just as ni'd suspected, the back began to recline, and an extra cushion rose up from the floor for niys legs and feet. Ni closed niys eye, and set niys prosthetic to sleep mode. It would be a little while longer until they actually left orbit, maybe ni would be able to get in a quick nap before then. Along with niys aching feet, niys brain was still in an unpleasant fog from the various vaccines ni'd had to register getting in order to make the voyage to the Branchspell-Alppain system. There were several diseases that were transmissible from Zarozezia to Arcturus (and vice versa), not to mention all the illnessess that could be transmitted from species to species alone, or even just the usual diseases different, long-separated groups of the same species could transmit to one another.

Star-flower-fever had already killed ten people so far this Arcturian

year, brought over by some rich antivaxxer expletive who'd bribed their doctor to spoof their vaccination records. Needless to say, that doctor had lost their medical liscence, and was being sued by too many entities for nir to keep up with. The antivaxxer had been killed for their crimes once the Arcturians had caught up with them. Supposedly, they'd tried to bribe the angry mob for safe passage, and the leader of the group had pretended to accept the deal...

...Then promptly killed them anyways, once the several billion points of interplanetary currently were transferred to their account. Then they'd used the money to pay for the funerary expenses and medical care for all the other victims of the star-flower-fever outbreak, and to make sure more vaccines against it could be manufactured and dispensed at all spaceports leading to Arcturus.

Ni had just gotten the latest version of the vaccine a few days ago, and was still feeling the ill effects, now mainly in the form of a heavy-head and physical tiredness (besides the tiredness that came from spending half a day walking without time to properly rest, then having to wake up early to walk again, then having to stand in line waiting with nowhere to sit).

The lounge was filling up with people, but their voices were a low, pleasant hum that easily faded into the background, and ni felt

nirself slowly being lulled by the sound into a gentle sleep.

021: Alterhuman Advancements: November 2122

Neopronouns: izi/(ito)/av/avi/(ka)/fiself, which will most follow the same rules as she/her/her/(hers)/herself pronouns, with “ito” used to replace any contractions that would be used like “she's” or “she'd”.

EX: “She's going to the store.” rather than saying “Izi's going to the store”, you say, “Ito going to the store.”

Replace she with izi

Replace she's or she'd with ito

Replace her with av

Replace hers with ka

Replace herself with fiself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Izi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as izi gets a fence set up around avi yard so the puppy can go outside without av having to walk it. Avi uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting av use, since izi lost ka. Ito going to buy toys and train the puppy fiself."

021: Alterhuman Advancements part 1

Izi sat in the waiting lounge, tapping the tip of avi cane on the tiled floor, enjoying the sharp metallic click it made each time, which echoed very nicely echoed in the large, now empty room.

There was no one else in the waiting room at the moment, otherwise izi would have picked a less intrusive way to stimulate avi senses while izi waited. Ito picked for avi operation to be at the last slot of the day, to avoid waiting amongst large crowds. The pandemic wasn't over yet, and through the clinic required that patients be tested before they could enter, and wear quarantine shields, izi still felt much more safe avoiding the crowds altogether whenever possible.

There was some quiet music playing over the speakers, but it was completely orchestral, with no lyrics, and izi didn't know what it was from or what emotions it was supposed to be conveying. It was certainly fast-paced, izi would give it that. But was it supposed to be funny? Serious? Thrilling? Scary? Izi had no clue.

Izi /had/ been happily reading on avi phone up until a few minutes ago, but ito stopped when one of the staff had called avi name to let av know they'd be ready for av in just a few minutes.

They'd said that at least five long, boring minutes ago, but now izi didn't want to start reading again if izi was just going to be interrupted immediately, which izi figured izi would be, at this point, since they probably wouldn't make av wait that much longer...but what if they did? What if izi was wasting time being bored for no reason?

It was a familiar conundrum, and it was annoying, but mostly, izi was impatient not with boredom, but with excitement.

Today was the day izi finally got avi alterations, and got to donate avi own unwanted organs to those who could use them. The waitlist hadn't been that long, only a few months since ito signed up, much shorter than many people who'd come before av, since the technology was advancing every day, making things faster, but it had felt like a lifetime.

This was the day ito been dreaming of. Izi had spent the last few months scrolling through the update videos of other people who'd gotten the alterations, reading articles and blog posts, and had even ordered avi first magazine subscription, ever!

It was called Alterhuman Advancements Monthly, and each monthly issue included interviews and pre- and post-alteration photos of each

person who'd undergone the procedure, and their reasons for making the alterations. Some of them were transgender, some were transspecies, and some just really wanted to have wings or a tail or fur. New editions were published every month, and ito signed up for the retroactive purchase, so ito gotten all the past issues, too! It had taken two weeks to read all of them and catch up to the present. It was worth every penny.

Ito joined several online communities of other people on the waitlist, and of those who were planning to join, and had already gotten their alterations. It was so exciting.

Ito spent more than fifty hours looking at fiself in the VR dressing rooms, and now the day was finally here. Izi didn't have to wait any longer. It was a dream come true.

Izi had decided what alterations izi would get long before izi got up the courage to join the waitlist.

Izi of course was going to get a tail. Because who wouldn't want a tail? (Well, besides the conservatives who thought alterations were the worst thing to happen since...well, they couldn't seem to decide. A lot of them said the internet, some said Queer people, some said 'PC SJW Cringiness'). There were lots of tails to choose from, and izi

could even get multiple if izi wanted to! But to start with, izi was just going to get one, and if izi decided izi wanted more down the line, ito get them then, but not sooner.

That was one of the most often repeated tips from all the groups ito joined –if you needed to be able to walk, don't get multiple tails to start with, or the time you'd need to recover and adjust would be triple what it would be with just one. It was better to get one to start with, learn how to use it, then get more once you were ready.

That was one mistake Altera, one of the first and most famous people to get the full alterations, was very happy to admit to making, so other people wouldn't make the same mistake. Altera had gotten their three spade-ended tails all at once, and it had taken them almost a year of physical therapy to get their usual ability to balance themselves back. The anti-alterationist crowd had had a field day with that, and had spent its time making up all sorts of absurd claims about Altera, their health, the doctors who had treated them, their therapists, and anyone and everyone they could think of to sling mud at.

Even now that Altera was fully recovered and back to their normal level of mobility and balance, the anti-alterationists still lied about what had happened. Every time izi went to the grocery store, izi had

to see their stupid magazines sitting on the shelf, and it seemed that every time izi saw one, the claims were even more outrageous than before.

But all of that was beside the point, which was that izi was going to follow the advice of everyone ito talked to, and start out with just one tail.

There were so many options, izi almost hadn't known how to choose, but eventually ito settled on a simple, furry, prehensile tail that would start at the base of avi spine. At the end of the tail would be six collapsible tendrils almost like human fingers, but symmetrical and smoother looking. They could also be overlapped and layered to blend in with the rest of the fur, for aesthetic purposes. Some people went with a normal tail, some got another human hand at the end, but izi thought this would look cooler, and be more useful than the plain prehensile tail.

The tail would, of course, have its own set of vertebra, separate from avi spine, and would be even more flexible and strong than either of avi arms. If anything ever happened to avi tail, it wouldn't cause any damage to avi spine, and if anything ever happened and avi tail got caught with enough force, it would come off by itself, with no harm done to av.

Izi hadn't understood the point of this feature at all, until someone online explained that it was in case of emergencies, like if someone was attacking you and grabbed you by the tail to stop you from escaping. Or other things, like if you got stuck in a burning building or something with something heavy fallen across your tail that you couldn't lift, among other things.

Izi would also be able to manually uncouple avi tail if izi needed to, by flexing the muscles in a specific way. You could only learn how to do this once you'd actually gotten it attached, though, so that was something ito have to learn. It hadn't stopped av from watching tons of videos about it, though. Everyone made it look so easy, izi was sure izi would master it in no time.

Along with the tail, izi was also getting the alteration that would cause the rest of avi skin to grow fur, whose length izi would be able to customize at any time with avi personal encoder. Ito chosen the baseline length to be an inch long to start with, and it would be smooth and soft, like a shorthair domestic cat's. The default pattern ito chosen would be black with large white spots, to match avi favorite animal, the spotted skunk. They'd been making a major comeback in recent years due to conservation efforts, and izi could only hope the trend would continue.

Izi was also getting avi ears adjusted, changing the shape of the outer ear to make them larger and pointier. This didn't match avi spotted skunk aesthetic, but izi liked the look of pointed ears better than rounded ones. Plus, it just looked more noticeably nonhuman, and if izi was going to do this, izi might as well go all the way, right? Also, it was practically tradition at this point.

But one popular change izi did draw the line at was wings. Izi was afraid of heights, which izi thought was a completely reasonable fear to have, and no way was izi ever going to willingly fly, not even under avi own power.

Izi had had more than a few friends with wings offer to take av flying before over the past few years since the full alterations began to gain popularity, but ito turned them down every single time. Izi wanted to keep avi feet firmly planted on the ground, thank you very much.

Along with the new fur, izi was also getting avi eyes recolored. Avi left eye would become magenta, the right would become violet. They were avi favorite colors, and it would make av look even more awesome.

And while all this was going on, izi would also be getting the

structure of avi left leg (the one that was most likely to dislocate) reinforced to make walking less painful. Izi would still need avi cane, but this would make avi life a million times less stressful. Izi would come back again in a few months for them to reinforce the other leg once they saw how the first alteration worked with 'in the field' testing.

The doctors would also be changing the internal shape of avi eyes, so izi wouldn't have to wear glasses anymore. That was going to be weird as heck, but izi was looking forward to it immensely.

No more having to constantly clean dust off the lenses, no more breaking them and being unable to leave the house until izi could get new ones, no more just having to deal with the tiny scratches that built up over time, no more having them fog up when izi went outside and it was humid, or fogging up when it got too cold...it was going to be awesome. Izi would actually be able to see all the time, even when izi was in the shower, or swimming! Izi would be able to go to the beach and actually swim and still be able to see!

Avi friend would be picking av up to bring av home once avi surgery was over, since izi would have to keep the bandages on avi eyes for the first twelve hours, since they'd be more sensitive to light until they adjusted. Izi planned to spend most of that time sleeping, so that

was just fine with av.

There were so many changes izi was looking forward to, izi still found it hard to believe the day had finally come. Izi was half expecting the doctor to come into the lounge to tell av there'd been a mix-up and it wasn't actually avi turn yet, izi would have to come back another day.

But when the doctor did finally come out to get av a few minutes later, it wasn't to tell av there'd been a mix up. It was, indeed, avi turn, if izi still wanted the alterations. Izi would have been dismayed at the question, but izi knew they were required to ask, so izi listened to the clearly memorized spiel patently.

Izi could still change avi mind if izi wanted to, and there would be no consequences or retaliation. Izi would not have to pay any cancellation fees or pay the clinic any money for the inconvenience. If izi decided izi didn't want the alterations now, and changed avi mind again within the next to weeks, izi would be given the next position in the waiting list, once they were done with whoever they'd taken in the meantime. Izi nodded along at the right moments and answered “yes” to every “do you understand what I've told you?”

There was one more paper izi needed to sign right before they began,

certifying that izi was giving the clinic permission, once and for all, to apply the alterations. The alterations could be removed again at any time, and izi could have them removed at any capable facility, it didn't have to be this clinic, or another clinic run by the same organization. Izi could even buy the alteration-removal drugs over the counter as long as izi had the proper ID certifying izi was of age.

Izi signed the last document happily, without a shred of hesitation, and willingly followed the doctor – a green-skinned, dragon-like woman with streaks of gold in his purple hair, and a long tail with a spade on the end – down the hall, and into avi new life.

022: Tutorial Sword

Neopronouns: ky/shal/shalk/shalself, which will follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with ky

Replace him with shal

Replace his with shalk

Replace himself with shalself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ky is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ky gets a fence

set up around shalk yard so the puppy can go outside without shal having to walk it. Shalk uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting shal use, since ky lost shalk. Ky's going to buy toys and train the puppy shalself."

022: Tutorial Sword

“Hey, who’s that Necromancer over there? Do you know ter pronouns? The one with the silver sword and the skeleton dog over by the forge. Do you know where mys got that sword? It looks awesome. Do you think mys’d trade me?”

“Oh, Veyis? Shalk pronouns are ky/shal/shalk/shalself. And as for the sword, no, I don’t think ky’d trade you for it. That sword is Sentimental for shal, since it originally belonged to shalk parent, and they got it off a commander they defeated, so no, I don’t think you’ll have any luck convincing shal to trade it for yours. No one wants one of the standard issue ones, they’re all too impatient and reckless.

“Why do you think you’re the only one who still has theirs? These idiots say they’re cursed, can you believe it? A sword that can’t be looted, that tells you everything you need to know about this game, and they want nothing to do with it. Most of these idiots get rid of it the first battle they face. If you didn’t know, when you defeat an enemy in battle, you can loot any items from them that you want except for their base layer of clothing, and any Sentimental items. You know how I said Veyis got shalk sword from shalk parent? Yeah, that means it’s Sentimental, and no one is allowed to loot it, since the Sentimental Exemption applies to it. The rules for what can

and can't be Sentimental are pretty complicated, so I won't go into them now, but that's also why Veyis has two swords, since everyone has to carry at least one weapon that can be looted. Anyone can carry multiple weapons, but after a while it just becomes cumbersome.

“You don't get an extra carry slot when you have a Sentimental object, and with the extra weapon you're required to carry if you have a Sentimental weapon, you end up permanently losing a slot, and especially when it comes to the higher tier battles, every item you bring counts, which is why not a lot of people keep Sentimental items, or at least not Sentimental weapons.”

“So let me get this right, everyone hates the default swords because they give you a tutorial, but then you're also going to give me a tutorial?”

“Yeah, because I get paid to tell the new people how things work. Everyone gets rid of their standard issue sword the first chance they get, so they end up not knowing how to do even basic things like bathing or weapon and armour maintenance. So since I decided to keep mine around until I actually knew what I was doing, everyone decided to elect me the official tutorial tutor, since none of the other experienced players have the patience to teach new people. Everyone who survives a battle using techniques or skills I taught them gives

me at 10% of any coins they picked up during the fight.”

“Wait, so now I’m going to have to pay you since you’re telling me this? You could have lead with that! That’s not fair!”

“No, no, you’re still level 1, so you’re exempt. Plus, you still have your sword, so it could teach you anything I can. You’d only have to start paying me once you hit level 3 if you’d already gotten rid of your sword. You don’t have to worry about paying me as long as you have that sword. The lessons it gives you run out at level 50, so you can imagine the slack I’m picking up by teaching the people who got rid of their sword during their first fight. Without me, this team wouldn’t have any idea how to do Spells or Techniques or Crafting. I was one of the founding four, and trust me, if I hadn’t had the common sense to keep my sword, this team wouldn’t even exist right now.”

“Wow. So you’ve been doing this for five years?”

“Yep. Almost six, actually, the anniversary is next month on the 2nd.”

“Woah. So, okay, if you know everything, is there a way I can change how my sword looks without getting rid of it? I like the

tutorial feature, but it's really plain looking. I want something dramatic or cool. Or at least I want to change the color, I have my eye on an outfit from the Jareq's and I want it to match."

"Well, you're in luck. Remember our sentimental Necromancer over there?"

"Yeah."

"Ky's our Craftsmaster. Ky can reforge your sword into different shapes and styles, and can dye it different colors for you too. If you're patient enough, ky'll even teach you how to do it yourself. Ky's always complaining that ky has to do everything because no one else wants to learn. I think at this point ky's literally paying people to become shalk apprentice, just so ky can have someone to help out with the list of orders."

"Wait, really?"

"Well, you'd have to ask shal if that offer is still on, I've been too busy with the new recruits to hang out with shal the last few days. Ky's friendly, especially towards new people, and shalk skele doesn't bite anyone that doesn't threaten shal, so don't worry about talking to shal or anything.

“If you want, I’ll even walk you over and introduce you and ask shal about reforging your sword. But before we do, you should think of a name for your sword if you haven’t already, you have to give it a name when you reforge it, and it has to be unique. If you open your journal, you can check which names are available, and it’ll suggest some for you if you can’t think of one.”

“Well, I’ve been calling it Chirithy in my head...uh, it’s from a video game, one of the older ones that you played on a cellphone.”

“Well, lets go to your journal and check if that name’s available. It definitely sounds unique so I bet it is—ah, look at that, it is! So we’d better hurry and get your sword reforged now, someone else out there might have the same idea! Trust me when I tell you that when you find a name you want, do not hesitate to claim it. Just don’t. Don’t worry about picking the new form for it yet, you can just reforge it into something quick and basic just to save the name, then you can come back later and choose a more intricate form. Come on, I’ll introduce you!”

“Okay, yeah, let’s go!”

“Hey, Veyis! Get that forge started back up to five, we need you to reforge a sword quick before the name gets taken!”

“Don’t yell at shal, ky’ll get mad!”

“Oh, don’t worry kid, this is just what we do. Plus, it takes time to heat the forge to the right temperature, and ky hates having to wait when ky could be doing something productive. Trust me, if we waited until we got all the way over there to tell shal what temperature we need, and then ky had to stand around and wait for it to get to the right heat even after ky already knew what ky was going to make, ky’d be a lot less happy to help.”

“Oh. Hey, wait a second, do I have to pay shal to reforge my sword? I only have fifteen coins the opening fight gave me, and I don’t know what the economy is like yet...”

“Ky usually charges around fifty coins for a reforging to cover the cost of the materials, but this one’s on me. Fifteen coins isn’t a lot, it’s mainly supposed to get you buying things, since the basic gear from Jareq only cost two coins each. While you’re buying the basic armour, you also get to look at all the cooler stuff you can buy later, so you’ll want to get more coins to buy them, so you’ll keep coming back for more fights. And since they release new outfits every other month, you always have a reason to keep coming back.”

“Please take this as a compliment—I can tell you’re the teacher

around here.”

“I do take it as a compliment. Thank you!”

“So why are you paying for my sword? I mean, I’m grateful, and I’ll pay you back later, but why? Do you just have a lot of coins?”

“I’ll tell you why. It’s because you’re reforging your standard issue sword. The more you like that thing, the more likely you’ll keep it, and the longer you keep it, the less work there is for me as long as you stick around. You know how I said Veyis is sick of being the only crafter? Well I’m sick of being the only one around here who can or will teach anyone how to do stuff. We need another jack of all trades, and if you’re willing to keep that sword around, you might just become it.”

“So Veyis will pay me to be shalk apprentice, and you’re bribing me to become your apprentice too?”

“Yep.”

“Are there any other teachers around here who are willing to pay for students?”

“Oh you better believe it.”

023: The Wild Dragon

Neopronouns: shey/shem/sheir/sheirself which follow the same rules as they/them/their/(theirs)/themselves.

Replace they with shey

Replace them with shem

Replace their with sheir

Replace theirs with sheirs

Replace themselves with sheirself

EX:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

Becomes:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

023: The Wild Dragon part 1

Lore crouched at the edge of the forest, holding as still as they could, trying not to startle the tiny dragon that had alighted just a few feet away, perched on a low branch of a tree, preening itself. It hadn't noticed them yet, and they wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. This wasn't the first wild dragon they'd ever seen, but it was the first time they'd ever seen this close to one without any fences or other barriers between them.

They breathed as slowly and quietly as they could, wondering how long it would take for the dragon to notice their presence. Their grasp on their mental abilities was weak, to say the least. They'd never been any good at reading other people's signs, not even when they were apparently making them as bright as possible. They didn't know if it would work, but they were aiming their thoughts at the dragon as much as they could, trying to create an aura of welcoming calmness despite the way their heart felt like it was going to burst out of their chest in excitement.

Wild dragons were notoriously hard to befriend, even more difficult than feral ones. Most people didn't think it was worth it, since wild dragons didn't get as big and weren't as adaptable or as house-friendly as common ones.

They didn't know how long they sat there, practically holding their breath, trying to mentally tap the dragon on the shoulder so they could tell it "HI! I'm friendly! Want to be friends?"

But eventually, their legs got tired from the way they were crouching, and they had to move, shifting their now-pained legs to a better position.

That got the dragon's attention, and it snapped upright from where it had started to curl around the branch to sleep, and its wide, startled eyes turned directly to where they were sitting.

Lore froze for a second, then gathered their courage, and said as calmly as possible, "Hi."

The dragon stared at them, not moving, its eyes locked with their own.

Was it talking to them? Was it trying to send them signs? Could it read what they'd been trying to tell it now that it was looking at them?

Hoping against hope, they started to say, "My name's—"

In a flash, the dragon was gone, shooting off further into the woods

and disappearing out of sight within a few seconds.

“...Lore...” shey trailed off, disappointment warring with the shock that shey’d even been lucky enough to get so close in the first place.

Finally, the sheer fortune of the entire encounter beat out the disappointment of not accomplishing a miracle, and shey laughed as shey pushed sheirself painfully to sheir feet, still scanning the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of the dragon again.

Mentally, shey was cataloguing the details of the dragon as they reluctantly began to continue on sheir walk, listing out its noticeable characteristics so shey would be able to recognize it if shey saw it again. This had been a very young dragon, so it was likely that this was an area it was in often, since younger dragons had smaller territories.

And where there was one, there were more, so even though shey hadn’t had much luck with this one this time, that didn’t mean sheir luck would be just as bad the next time shey saw it, or if shey encountered a different one entirely.

Maybe, just to be safe, shey would start carrying a bag of dragon treats with shem.

Technically it was cheating, but they figured it was fair, since they couldn't read or send signs the way other people could.

* * *

Three days later

* * *

“Hey, Lore, didn't you say you saw a wild dragon around here a few days ago?” Becui asked, suddenly stopping so she could stare into the trees, craning her neck back to look up into the branches.

Lore stopped too, mostly because if they hadn't, they would have crashed into Becui, who had stopped in the middle of the path without warning. “It wasn't here exactly,” Lore said, “It was maybe ten more minutes ahead.” She pointed in the direction they'd been walking.

They remembered where they'd seen the dragon mainly because there was a conveniently fallen tree just a foot from where the dragon had landed.

Usually, they had a horrible sense of direction, and wouldn't have been able to even tell you how to get to the general area, let alone

the exact location. Luckily for shem the fallen tree was eye-catching and hard to miss, an easy landmark amidst an otherwise confusing mass of greenery where all the trees looked the same, and the well-maintained path had few variations.

Becui turned to look the way they'd pointed, looking excited.

"Maybe we'll see it again! I bet I could convince it we're friendly!"

Lore had told Becui about sheir fear that the dragon had been trying to talk to shem, not realizing they couldn't see the signs it was sending shem, or that they wasn't even sure they were sending anything to it at all.

Unlike Lore, Becui could send and see signs with no problem at all. For her, it was second nature, as easy as breathing. For Lore, it was like trying to breathe through a straw. They could never see anything people said they were sending shem, even when they insisted they were making them as bright and garish as possible.

For the first ten or so years of sheir life, they'd actually assumed that no one could see signs, they were just speaking metaphorically or trying to be poetic. But no, they meant it literally. They could all apparently literally send and see messages and words and feeling to each other through patterns and shapes of color that they couldn't

see or create sheirself.

Sometimes, when they were feeling especially frustrated with sheir failings at communicating with others, they wondered to sheirself if the whole thing was just some big, mean joke everyone else was playing on shem.

But they knew what wasn't actually true. The odds of shem being the butt of a joke that spanned the whole of history on the entire planet was just...not even remotely in the realm of possibility. Not unless someone who really hated shem was going to invent time travel at some point just to spite shem.

Well, they couldn't say they didn't have any enemies. The other kids could sniff out people who were different faster than they could finish saying "hello", and to them, different automatically meant wrong. No matter where sheir family moved, they never had many friends, and more people seemed to hate shem just because they dared to exist near them than they'd even spoken to.

Becui was bullied too, though not because she had any problems speaking. She had burn scars on her face, neck, left arm, and part of her torso from an accident she'd been in as a baby, leaving her missing an eye, and with reduced strength and movement in that

arm.

Thankfully, she had no memories of the accident that had caused it, and the scars didn't normally cause her pain, but she was heavily disfigured, and for the bullies, that was excuse enough for cruelty.

Becui and Lore helped each other stand up to the bullies, though nothing they ever did actually got them to stop. It was a friendship formed by adversity, and cemented through shared interests in wildlife, reading, writing, and wondering why anyone would purposefully choose to be cruel when not doing that was so easy.

Lore wanted to sigh as she thought about it, but smiled for Becui instead. "Come on," she said, remembering the thrill of excitement she'd felt when she first set eyes on the dragon, "I'll show you where it was!"

024: The Universe Likes you

Neopronouns: an/droid/androidself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with an

Replace its with droid

Replace itself with androidself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"An is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as an gets a fence set up around droid yard so the puppy can go outside without an having to walk it. Droid uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting an use, since an lost doid.
An's going to buy toys and train the puppy androidself.”

024: The Universe Likes You

Saint stared at Lonicera, uncomprehending. “I’m sorry, what?” An said, sure an’d misheard.

There was absolutely no way he’d just told droid that he wanted droid to—

“I want you to take this bomb, and use it to destroy the universe.” Lonicera said, exactly like Saint’d thought an’d heard him say the first time.

An stated.

“What?”

“I know it sounds drastic—” Lonicera said in what was apparently supposed to be a reassuring tone of voice, “But it’s the only way to save the universe.”

“Blowing up the universe is the only way to save it?!” There was no way they were having this conversation.

“Yes.” Lonicera said, anyways.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

Saint stared. Lonicera was serious.

“Well...” Lonicera amended after a few seconds, “It’s not so much a bomb as a reset button. Except it is also a bomb, because it is going to blow up, and it will destroy the universe, but it’ll only destroy this version of the universe. It’ll reset it to an earlier version so it can continue down a different path. This version became irreparably corrupted because of what Vitex did to it, and if we don’t reset it soon it’ll be destroyed for real with no chance of recovery. This bomb has to be set off on a specific planet so that it’ll destroy this universe in the right way that it’ll be reset instead of wiped from existence entirely. You have to take it to that planet and you have to find a place to set it off.”

Oh this was not happening. Except that it was.

“Why are you telling me this?” An demanded, “I’m not a scientist! I’m not an astronaut! I’ve never even left the territory, let alone the gods damned planet! And you’re talking about leaving the solar system! I don’t even know you! You don’t even know me! We just

met a few hours ago! How do you know I'm not one of Vitex's minions? How do you know I'm not going to use this to convert the universe into the energy those people from the alterverse were after?"

"Because the universe itself picked you. It likes you."

"What??"

025: Race to the Top

Neopronouns: che/chim/chis/chimself, xi/xir/xirself, thi/hil/
(hilz)/hilself

che/chim/chis/chimself follows the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with che

Replace him with chim

Replace his with chis

Replace himself with chimself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Che is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as che gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without chim having to walk it. Chis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting chim use, since che lost chis. Che's going to buy toys and train the puppy chimself."

xi/xir/(xirs)/xirself follows the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself:

replace she with xi

replace her with xir

replace hers with xirs

replace herself with xirself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

becomes:

"Xi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xi gets a fence set up around xir yard so the puppy can go outside without xir having to walk it. Xir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting xir use, since xi lost xirs. Xi's going to buy toys and train the puppy xirself."

thi/hil/(hilz)/hilself also follows the same rules as she/her/
(hers)/herself

replace she with thi

replace her with hil

replace hers with hilz

replace herself with hilself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers."

becomes:

"Thi is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as thi gets a fence set up around hil yard so the puppy can go outside without hil having to walk it. Hil uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting thi use, since thi lost hilz."

025: Race to the Top

Chase craned his head back to stare up at the cliff of grey rock, trying and failing to see the top through the thick mist that circled the higher parts.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Keywin whispered, keeping his voice low as though afraid the mountain itself would hear him, “Agni said we could go with him- -”

“No,” Chase corrected, “Agni said that if he saw us on the trail, he would throw us off of it. You missed the rest of that conversation.”

Keywin stared up at Chase with large eyes. “Did he really say that?”

Chase explained, “Agni thinks the trail is illegal, because his family bribed the guide that tends to it. He said if he sees us anywhere near it, he’ll throw us off the side. We can’t take the trail, we have to climb up here.”

Chase stared up at the cliff again, at the hard grey stone and the menacing clouds that circled the peak. He tried to muster his courage. “We can do this,” he said, “It’s just like at home.”

Keywin followed chis gaze back to the cliff. “I don’t know where you live, but my home has nothing like this. Not even remotely.” Chase felt xir tighten xir hold on the harness that kept xir in place on chis back.

“It’ll be a piece of cake.” Che said, trying to sound reassuring, “The ravines near Tiyo go way deeper than this thing does high, and I’ve spent years climbing up and down them.”

Keywin didn’t say anything, either to argue further or concede, and Chase knew it was because xi knew that no matter how afraid xi was of falling, they couldn’t afford not to climb.

They had to beat Ahni to the top. They had to get to the spring before thi did.

They had to convince the guardian not to listen to hil, not to accept hil bargain.

Chase eyed the cliff, judging the distances between areas where che would be able to grip the stone with chis claws. Yes, che was confidant che could climb this.

It was simply a matter of making the first leap.

The ravine that separated them from the side of the cliff was ten feet across.

Easy enough, on its own, but once Chase leapt, it wouldn't simply be a matter of landing. It would be a matter of grabbing onto the cliff quickly enough and smoothly enough not to fall, and without hurting Keywin.

/I can do this,/ Chase thought to himself, /I have to do this./

026: The Great Machine, Parts 1 & 2: On the Road, and The First Night

Neopronouns: xe/xim/xis/ximself, ze/zim/zis/zimself,
li/lia/lia/lia

All three sets follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself:

Replace he with xe, ze, or li

Replace him with xim, zim, or lia

Replace his with xis, zis, or lia

Replace himself with ximself, zimself, or lia

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xe gets a fence set up around xis yard so the puppy can go outside without xim having to walk it. Xis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting xim use, since xe lost xis. Xe's going to buy toys and train the puppy ximself."

or

"Ze is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ze gets a fence set up around zis yard so the puppy can go outside without zim having to walk it. Zis uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting zim use, since ze lost zis. Ze's going to buy toys and train the puppy zimself."

or

"Li is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as li gets a fence set up around lias yard so the puppy can go outside without lia having to walk it. Lias uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting lia use, since li lost lias. Li's going to buy toys and train the puppy liaself."

A partial set of alternate first person pronouns are also used, with each instance of "I" replaced with "Dy".

026 The Great Machine, Part 1: On the Road:

“Please state your name for the record.” the voice came from the intercom higher up the wall, sounding like this was a script they’d read many times.

“Uh, I’m Veyk.” Veyk said, not sure where xe was supposed to be looking. There was what xe’d assumed from a distance was a window in front of xim, but it was just a ledge sticking out of the wall. No glass or sliding panels. Xe decided that looking at the intercom was probably xis best bet.

If they had an intercom, and they knew xe was out here, they probably had cameras too. “Am I in the right place? I was looking for - -”

“Please state your full name for the record.” The voice sounded like this was something they had to say a lot too.

“Full name? I - -” Veyk stared up at the intercom, bewildered. “It’s just Veyk. I don’t know what you mean by full name.”

“Your full name would potentially include your family name, clan name, village name, or any other names that are used to identify you

and to distinguish you from others with your personal name, including titles. If you're from beyond Clade's Edge - -"

"Yes!" Veyk interrupted, relieved to hear a familiar term, "I only just crossed the border a few days ago. I was told to go to Bricklayer, a crier that came to the territory promised me a job working on the Great Machine. He said he would send word ahead of me, so they'd know I was coming."

Normally, xe would never travel so far just to find a paying job, but the crier had promised that the pay would be more than xe could ever dream of finding elsewhere, and food, lodging, and medical services would be supplied at no extra cost, to both the worker and any family members they brought with them.

Veyk had left Xaurec, Aryl, and Kanta back at the camp they'd slept at last night while xe went ahead to investigate the wall that cut through part of the valley, hoping they'd already reached their destination.

None of them had ever left the territory before, let alone gone as far as Bricklayer, but the crier had assured them that if they followed the eastern rode, they wouldn't be able to miss it.

Well, they'd followed the road this far, and the wall here stuck out like a sore thumb. Surely, this had to be the - -

“If you're trying to get to Bricklayer, you have to follow the road another fifty miles east. This is Brox, we aren't part of the Coalition for the Great Machine. You can enter the city once we register you, and spend the night at open ports, but it won't be free.”

Veyk hesitated. “Are kelwyn allowed in?” Xe finally asked, thinking xe already knew the answer, but hoping for a pleasant surprise. Most of the people within the clade didn't hide the fact that they hated people from beyond the edge, and they especially hated kelwyn. The crier had promised that things weren't like that in Bricklayer, but this wasn't Bricklayer.

“Yes...”

Veyk heard a 'but' in there. It was obvious that while technically legal, kelwyn weren't actually welcome.

And you know what? Xe didn't even really want to stick around to find out the details.

“Well, I'll just be going, then.” Xe said abruptly. Xe needed to get

back to the others and let them know they'd be staying out on the road at least another two days. They had plenty of supplies, but they would have to make it to the next camping spot before nightfall, and xe'd already wasted time on this fruitless endeavor.

"I've heard that things are better in Bricklayer!" The voice called out as xe began to walk away, "Good luck!"

Veyk just rolled xis eyes, and began the jog back to the main road.

026: The Great Machine: Part 2: The First Night

“Hey guys, say hi to our new digger, Veyk! Xe just moved here from past Clade’s Edge, and xe came all this way just to work on the Great Machine with us, so I know you’ll all give xim a very warm welcome, isn’t that right, Lern?”

One of the people scattered around the fire in the middle of the camp threw their arms into the air and protested, “I didn’t even do anything yet!”

“Exactly!” Kvalic slashed a wing through the air for emphasis.

“Keep it that way!”

Veyk wasn’t sure whether to be alarmed or amused. Kvalic hadn’t mentioned anything about a troublestarter on the walk over. Xe wasn’t sure how seriously xe was supposed to be taking this interaction. Did Lern actually do something wrong with past workers, or was this just some sort of inside joke?

“Uh, should I be worried?” Xe asked hesitantly, keeping xis voice low so only Kvalic could hear.

But instead of giving a serious answer like xe hoped, Kvalic just

laughed loudly, and lightly slapped xis shoulder with a wing, cackling, “Only if you like fish!”

This caused a scattering of laughter from some of the other workers, except for Lern, who continued to protest their innocence in what sounded like genuine grievance.

Veyk was glad xe was wearing a mask to keep out the dust and night insects, because it meant xe didn’t have to keep the annoyed scowl off xis face.

If these people were going to be this annoying the whole time xe was working with them, xe had the feeling xe wouldn’t be working here long.

Kvalic abruptly turned and left without any further conversation or warning, apparently deciding that that was enough of an introduction that zis job here was done, leaving Veyk standing awkwardly at the edge of the circle, with no idea what to do next.

There were at least three different species of people here, none of whom were even the same species as Kvalic, and Veyk had no idea what kind of etiquette they would expect from xim.

Fortunately, one of them decided to take pity on xis clear confusion, and came over to greet xim properly, stepping over other people's assorted legs and tails and lounging bodies to join xim at the edge of the circle while the rest of them went back to talking amongst themselves.

They were another quadruped, but unlike xim, they had two pairs of arms, not just one. Their legs were in the middle of their body, with the front pair hending backwards, and the back pair bending forwards, with a matching set of arms in front of and behind them.

From what xe could tell just by looking, they appeared to have hard, chitin like armour like an insect, instead of fur, feathers, scales, bark, or skin.

Most of their body was orange, with thick, lighter yellow stripes on the back of their thorax, and smaller light yellow spots on their abdomen. The top parts of their arms and legs were grey-brown, and their hands, lower legs, and feet were bright yellow, reflecting back the light of the fire whenever they moved. Their head sat at the front of their body on a short neck, and was shaped like an oval, with a single large, orange eye at the front, two depressions that might have been ears or a nose on the sides, and mandibles for a mouth.

“Hello,” They said, sitting down in front of xim and holding out both of their front hands in a familiar greeting. Xe copied them gratefully, sitting down in the tough grass and reaching forward with xis fronds.

Theirs were smaller than xis, with three appendages tipped with long, hard claws, in sharp contrast to xis six flexible tendrils. Since xis fronds were softer, xe placed xis on top of theirs, and they touched them together for a moment before pulling back.

Nothing exciting happened, which xe’d been expecting, but surprisingly, there was a slight tingle on the tips of xis tendrils, indicating that at least some sort of transference had happened, just not enough to tell anything by, at least on xis end.

“My name’s Veyk.” Xe said, not sure how much information they’d gotten out of that, “I’m phaen, and I go by xe, xim, xis, and ximself. What about you? I’m sorry, our chemicals aren’t compatible enough for me to have gotten any information.”

The quadruped opened their mandibles wide in what xe recognized easily as a friendly smile. “My name is Oleili Tevisi, and you can call me Oleili, it’s my personal name. I am liavnu, and I go by li, lia, lias, and liaself. It’s nice to meet you, Veyk. I’m sorry Kvalic seems to have abandoned you, ze does that with everyone. Ze seems to

think that being dropped into a situation without help is the best way to learn, which is why it's a very good thing ze isn't in charge of anything except giving new hires the tour."

"And just for the record!" A voice called out from the circle that Veyk recognized as Lern's, "I'm not going to eat you, no matter what Kvalic else says! Ze's just joking, and don't know how to convey it!"

"No," Another voice piped up, "Dy'm pretty sure at this point ze just refuses to learn.. Dy've been here since the start and Dy tried to teach zim when Dy first met zim, and no matter how many times Dy explain it to zim, ze never listens. Ze doesn't want to learn, ze thinks we should all just be able to magically tell when ze's joking and when ze's being serious."

Yeah, that fit with what Veyk had seen of Kvalic so far. Xe shook xis head in exasperation. "Doesn't ze know how hard it is to read the tone and body language of an unfamiliar species?"

"Yes," Oleili said, "But ze doesn't care. Ze thinks its everyone else's problem. There have been many complains to zis superiors, but no one ever does anything. We have a theory that ze's a favorite sibling of one of the council members, but no one knows for sure." Li stood,

gesturing with lia head towards the crowded circle. “Enough about our annoying boss. Come sit with us, we can all properly introduce ourselves, and you can get something to eat. You get your first rations on the first full day you work, so you’ll get yours tomorrow, but we always pool ours, and there are plenty to go around.”

Li lead the way, and xe followed, grateful that the other workers were considerate enough this time to pull their legs and tails and other appendages out of the way so xe could walk past them without worrying about stepping on anyone.

They’d all arranged themselves in circles around the stove in the middle of the clearing, with smaller people close to the fire and larger people in the back, though it didn’t seem to be a universal rule. Some people were sitting on the dirt or grass itself, some were sitting on blankets, and a few had cushions.

Oleili led xim to an open space in the middle where li had been sitting on a dark green blanket, and someone threw a cushion so that it landed right in front of Veyk. Xe jumped in surprise, then called in the general direction it had come from, “Thanks!” right as another cushion flew through the air and slammed into xis face.

It was heavy enough to knock xim to the ground, and the shock of it

left xim dazed for a few seconds, trying to figure out what had happened and why xis face and shoulder suddenly hurt.

The camp was suddenly humming with thunderous vibrations, but xe couldn't figure out what anyone was saying past the dull throb in the side of xis head where it had hit the dirt.

Xe pushed ximself upright, lifting a frond to xis face to make sure xe wasn't bleeding, and found ximself staring into Oleili's single large eye, wide with concern, less than a few inches from xis face. Xe jerked back instinctively, and felt the fragile metal of xis hearing-aid dislodge even further.

Oleili backed up a bit to give xim more space, and lia mandibles opened and closed, but xe couldn't make sense of it. Li didn't have lips for xim to read, and even if li did, xe didn't speak the language, and without xis hearing-aid and translator, xe couldn't hear or understand what anyone was trying to say.

Xe guessed that li was asking if xe was okay, and lifted both xis fronds to reassure li, and did xis best to say clearly, "I'm okay, my hearing-aid just got knocked loose, I can't understand you, I have to fix it first." Xe could feel it inside xis ear, the two main pieces knocked out of the base. They were all connected with tiny wires

that were rooted in xis skull, so there wasn't any danger of them falling out of xis ear entirely, but xe had to fix them before xe would be able to hear or understand anyone that didn't speak the sign-language xe'd grown up with.

Most of the other workers had gotten to their feet and gathered around Veyk, as well as another person further back in the crowd that xe couldn't see past the gathered people, probably the person who'd thrown the second cushion. Veyk was giving them the benefit of the doubt and assuming that hitting xim in the face had been an accident.

Oleili was trying to talk to xim again, moving lia mandibles and gesturing with lia hands in a way that meant nothing that xe could understand.

But there should be nothing stopping lia from understanding or hearing xim, so xe said again, enunciating as best xe could when xe couldn't hear the sounds xe was making, "I'm not hurt, but my hearing-aid was knocked loose, and I have to get my friend to fix it for me. Can you show me the way back to the main entrance? They're not a worker, they're just visiting, so they're camped outside. I'll know my way from there, I just don't remember how to get back to the entrance. Can you show me?"

Trying to speak out loud when xe couldn't hear what xe was saying was always hit or miss. Xe couldn't tell if xe was speaking too loudly, or not loudly enough.

Oleili seemed confused, but after a moment li deliberately nodded lia head, then glanced over lia shoulder to say something to the rest of the crowd.

Then li turned back to Veyk and gestured for xim to turn around, so xe did so, heading back towards the spot where Kvalic had left xim at the entrance to the clearing as the crowd parted to let xim pass without issue, many of them looking concerned.

Xe resisted the urge to sigh as Oleili moved past xim to lead xim down the correct path. The annoyance wasn't directed at lia though.

This was a frequent issue with xis hearing-aid, and finding a solution was one of the reasons xe'd decided to come all this way to Bricklayer and work on the Great Machine.

The the main reason was that the surgeons in Bricklayer were probably the only people within a year's journey that could perform the surgeries that Aryl and Xaurec needed. Veyk had gotten xis years and years ago, before the town surgeon had passed away.

The other reason was that Kanta was looking for mates for the first time, and wanted the good luck that came with pairing with people who lived far away. Especially if xe could convince some of them to return with them when they went back to their territory, and bring their luck with them.

Hopefully some of that luck would rub off on Veyk so that xe could find someone besides Xaurec who could fix xis hearing-aid for xim. Or so that xe would be able to find someone who could permanently stabilize it sooner rather than later. Or maybe just someone who was smart enough to build an entirely new one from scratch.

The scientist who had created it for xim had disappeared just as abruptly as he had appeared, dashing all over the territory with his companion like a kaliba that had broken into the stores of fermenting fruit. Veyk didn't even know his name, he'd just called himself a doctor without elaborating further. Veyk didn't know where he was from, who he was related to, or where xe could find him again.

Maybe he would be here, working on the Great Machine, but he had disappeared so quickly that Veyk wasn't going to get xis hopes up. Maybe xe would never see him again, and would just have to hope that xe could find someone else who knew how to work the hearing-aid enough to fix it.

It obviously hadn't been designed for twoqi use, unless whoever had designed it had wanted it to be so obnoxious and inconvenient that at times Veyk was tempted to rip it out and throw it into the creek.

And oh, how convenient. There was a creek that ran parallel to the path Oleili was leading xim down now, lia orange markings seeming to glow in the darkness. Xe could rip the darn thing out of xis ear and chuck it in to be swept away if xe wanted to.

But...xe wasn't quite that annoyed with it just yet.

Xaurec could fix it for xim tonight, and tomorrow... well, tomorrow was xis first day of labor, so xe would have to wait and see what exactly that entailed before making any final decisions.

Until then, xe followed Oleili into the deepening night, hoping things would be better in the morning.

027: Crash Landing on Earth

Neopronouns: neo/neos/neoself, used the same was as it/its/itself

Replace it with neo

Replace its with neos

Replace itself with neoself

EX:

“It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself.”

Becomes:

"Neo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as neo gets a fence set up around neos yard so the puppy can go outside without neo having to walk it. Neos uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he’s letting neo use, since neo lost

neos. Neo's going to buy toys and train the puppy neoself.”

027: Crash Landing on Earth

The reports started flooding in, almost overwhelming neos interface with the sudden deluge of information. Temperature, humidity, salinity, too many statistics for neo to keep up with by neoself.

But Razing was still offline, and to make everything worse, the proximity alarms started screaming overhead, several minutes far too late, the ghost of Razing's sensor contact finally catching up with real time.

The warning song scared the iflings even more than they'd already been frightened out of their tiny wits, and neo felt them prickling on neos back, digging their claws in deeper so they couldn't be pried away. Neos planetsuit would stop that from happening in any case except for the worst possible scenario, but it was an instinctive holdover from much harsher times, and right now, neo was just comforted to know they were all safe and accounted for. Every one of them had packed themselves down into the very bottom of their cradle cells, leaving the only cold spots in the six hexes that neo'd eaten on the disastrous trip here when the rest of the supplies ran out, all along the front, where they were easiest to reach.

That left neo with thirty-one iflings left, and neo intended to keep it

that way. Neo had come out here to the stars to show neos children the wonders of the universe, neo wasn't going let something like a crash landing stop that from happening.

Neo was going to get Razing back online, figure out what had crashed into them and knocked Razing out, and get back on course.

Assuming neo could figure out what that course was supposed to be. The last time neo'd been able to look at the navigational systems, neo'd had no idea where they were. This was not the first time they'd been slapped out of their path, though, this time it hadn't been so much 'slapped' as 'pulled with all the sudden force of gravity'.

They had been more than far enough away from the well of this planet's gravity to avoid any disturbances. They might have been in an unfamiliar stellar system, in an unfamiliar section of the galaxy, but gravity still functioned by the same rules as it always had - - they should /not/ have been pulled down to this planet at all, let alone so suddenly and violently that poor Razing blacked out from the force of it.

The only upside to this whole situation was that tal hadn't been conscious for their entry into the atmosphere - - tal'd always been afraid of crashing, and now it had finally happened. Maybe it was

for the best that Razing had been knocked out before it happened. Neo knew that if neos worst fear ever came true (becoming the host to a farik, which had been a reoccurring nightmare ever since neo was a crawler [why neos family had thought it was a good idea to show crawlers such a documentary, neo would never understand]), and neo had the choice, neo would rather be unconscious until it was over.

Well no, there was another upside - - they were all still alive. Neo could feel Razing's life signs deep inside, still going strong, just subdued and dreaming for the moment.

Neo pushed neos senses out beyond Razing's hull, trying to get a sense of their surroundings. There were still too many status reports for neo to sort through without Razing's help, but this at least would let neo get an idea of the situation.

Neo felt a sensation of liquid, along with gas - - it didn't take much guesswork to figure out they'd crashed into a body of liquid of some sort, and were floating on the surface, which meant it was denser than the oceans on Liavar. It also wasn't burning Razing or causing any sort of adverse reaction, so as long as nothing attacked them, they were probably safe enough, for now.

And as though the universe itself wanted to spite neos optimism, outside, at the very edges of neos senses, there was movement.

Heavy, big movement, approaching from below at a diagonal.

Something was coming, and if neos senses were to be trusted, it was as big, or bigger, than Razing.

And tal was still unconscious. There were no defensive systems neo could access without Razing's help. They were defenseless.

The shape came closer, and there was nothing neo could do about it.

028: You Learn Something New Everyday

Neopronouns: ne/rix/riv/rixelf which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ne

Replace him with rix

Replace his with riv

Replace himself with rixelf

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ne is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ne gets a fence

set up around riv yard so the puppy can go outside without riv having to walk it. Riv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting riv use, since ne lost riv. Ne's going to buy toys and train the puppy rixelf."

028: You Learn Something New Everyday

Pandora hadn't been expecting riv friends to reach up and pull rix off the wall once ne got close enough to the ground for them to grab.

One moment ne was about to step for the last foothold before ne could reach the floor, the next, riv friends' hands were on riv shirt, arms, shoulders, pulling riv down and into their collective embrace.

Pandora was immediately engulfed by their arms wrapping around rix, as riv senses were assaulted by the sudden heat, pressure, and sounds.

For a few horrifying seconds, ne couldn't even move, too overwhelmed by the horrifying experience of all riv friends surrounding rix, and all of them touching rix, the pressure on riv arms and shoulders and chest making rix feel like ne was drowning.

Anywhere riv friends touched rix, it was like there was a live wire between them, but instead of electricity, it was pure sensation in its most terrible form: pain. Like a burn, but even more, and even worse -- it was sickening, it was too much.

It took Pandora a few horrifically long, terrified seconds to figure

out that riv friends weren't actually trying to smother or attack rix, they were giving rix a group hug. They hadn't raced up here to murder rix.

Pandora wanted to tell them to let go, but the horrible sensations combined with the sheer horrified /bafflement/ of what was happening stole riv voice. Ne couldn't move. Ne was frozen like a deer in the headlights. Ne could barely even breathe.

Ne just couldn't believe it. /This/ was what a group hug felt like?? /This/ was the torment that everyone was always swooning over as the cutest, most heartwarming thing ever to happen?? All of the shows and movies ne had ever watched, all the books and comics, had lied to rix??? How in the world was this possible!?

All ne could do was stay frozen like a statue, unable to move to even cringe away from the invasive, painful touches. Only a few horrible seconds had passed since it began, but it felt like a lifetime.

Suddenly, May's voice suddenly called out, rising high above the din from the celebrations outside, "Hey! Hey, everyone, stop! Everyone back off! You didn't ask if you could hug him! Let go, give him some space, Calem doesn't look like he's enjoying this!"

Immediately, Pandora's other friends released rix and jumped away, exclaiming several variations of, "Sorry!" as ne stumbled from the sudden lack of support, and ne had to expend every ounce of riv restraint just to stop rixelf from spinning around and leaping right back up the rock climbing wall and out of reach.

The harness was still on rix, and beeping at rix in alarm about a "fall detected", and the heart-rate monitor was giving its own warning chirps, telling rix riv heart-rate was far higher than normal, even taking the exercise ne'd been doing into consideration. And ne could feel the proof in riv chest - riv heart was racing.

Riv friends backed away, and Pandora backed up, entirely on instinct, until riv shoulders hit one of the footholds.

Ne frantically shook out riv arms, trying to get the pins and needles that were crawling along riv skin to stop. This was unbearable. It was like they were still touching rix, ne could still feel the weight like they hadn't even let go. Ne flexed riv hands convulsively, trying to get the sensation to go away, but it didn't. In desperation, ne ripped the harness off and flung it to the floor, hoping the removal of that weight would help, and knowing ne shouldn't be trying to climb in this sort of mental state. It didn't help, but it did stop the harness from beeping.

Joy said loudly, "I'm really sorry about that, man!" as way of apology, drawing Pandora's wild gaze to him where he stood, one hand on the back of his neck, looking surprised and upset, but not as upset as Pandora thought the situation warranted. Clearly, Joy was not aware of the full effect his touch - - along with everyone's - - was still having on Pandora. Joy continued, "I was just so happy to see you were okay, I didn't even think to ask if I could hug you or not. I'm really sorry." He said, sounding sincere. The words could not possibly make up for what Pandora was suffering now.

"I'm sorry, dude!" Chad added, "We should have asked first, it won't happen again!" Pandora wished it hadn't happened in the first place. But unlike some people, ne wasn't a time traveler, ne couldn't go back in time and warn rixelf not to get within riv friends' reach without telling them not to touch rix.

The others all chimed in with equally help-less apologies and reassurances that they wouldn't hug "him" without permission again, but the whole time, Pandora was still trying to get rixelf under control. Ne couldn't appreciate the fact that they were apologizing because ne was still suffering. It /still hurt/.

Ne could still feel the pressure against riv skin, tingling like hot, painful electricity, even though there wasn't anything there. Ne was

looking at riv arm, and there was nothing there. Ne rubbed riv arms together, one across the other, hoping that would help, but it didn't do anything.

“I—I wouldn't have known to tell you no if you had asked.” Ne stammered out, feeling like ne was going to cry, completely overwhelmed and confused. This didn't make any sense. Why was this happening? “I don't know why this —feels so bad! It's not that I don't like you all —”

“No, no, it's okay, Calem, you don't have to apologize!” May interrupted rix, and darted her way through the others so that she was standing in front of rix before she continued firmly, “It's okay to be touch-averse, you don't need to apologize, no one's going to take it personally, /right?/” There was force on the last word, and as she said it, she turned to look back at the rest of their friends, who all immediately nodded eager agreement and chorused, “Right!” and “Of course!” and a few more “Sorry!”s.

Then she turned back to Pandora, smiling sympathetically. “It helps me if I wash my hands or my arms or whatever it is after someone touches me,” She said, gesturing towards where Pandora was still rubbing riv arms together, “It helps to get rid of the weird feeling. It might help you too!” Somehow, ne knew she had to put effort in to

make her voice seem light and cheerful.

She looked around past their friends, and her eyes visibly widened as she apparently actually took in the scale of riv bedroom for the first time.

After a stunned pause, she seemed to collect herself, and turned back to rix again, forcefully, asking with her normally cheerful voice a little even more obviously strained now, “Is there a bathroom or a sink nearby? You can see if it’ll help at all.”

Pandora nodded towards the bathroom on the far side of the room, still rubbing riv arms, trying to get rid of the sensation, valiantly resisting the urge to see if scratching rixelf with riv nails would help. Ne was very tempted to claw rixelf bloody, but that probably would just make everything worse.

May threw a fist into the air like it was a huge victory, and charged away across the room, leaving their friends with no choice but to part way for her like she would run them over if they didn't.

Pandora followed her, not knowing what else to do but trusting her to know what she was talking about.

The rest of riv friends stayed where they were, and began to murmur amongst themselves, most their voices too low for Pandora to hear except in small chunks. Ne knew they were talking about riv reaction to the hug. There wasn't anything else they could possibly be talking about, not this soon after it had happened.

And as ne heard part of what was being said as ne walked away, was just now occurring to Pandora that ne hadn't told them ne was nonbinary yet, which was why they were calling rix “he”, and “Calem”. Ne would have to fix that as soon as ne no longer felt like dying from whatever the heck was happening. Right now, if ne had to choose between being misgendered again, and getting another hug, ne would rather be misgendered a million times.

Ne followed May across riv room, then led the rest of the way at a fast walk when she began to hesitate, since the door to the bathroom blended in if you didn't know what to look for, and she clearly couldn't tell where it was. It slid open upon riv approach and the lights came on automatically, and she followed rix inside.

Ne went immediately to the large sink, and shoved riv hands under the faucet, commanding, riv voice still audibly shaking, and hard to get out past the lump in riv throat, “Water on, hot, with soap.”

The sink turned on, letting loose a stream of hot, soap-infused water onto riv shaking hands. Ne immediately began to scrub at them as hard as ne could, the scented bubbles wafting the smell of a Persian silk tree's flowers into the air. Unfortunately, the sensations on riv skin were still too horrible for what was usually riv favorite scent to help.

Ne scrubbed at riv hands under the stream of hot water until the temperature almost became too hot, hoping it would make /all of it/ go away.

For good measure, ne splashed the soapy water up onto riv arms, and scrubbed them, too, barely resisting the urge to use riv nails. Riv heart was still pounding in riv chest like ne'd run a marathon. Ne was doing riv best to take slow, deep breaths, but that didn't seem to be affecting the rate of riv heart at all. Nor were the pins and needles crawling over every inch of riv skin where ne'd been touched.

And while the hot water did seem to slowly be helping with riv hands and now slightly on riv arms, none of this was helping with where ne'd been grabbed on riv chest, shoulders, or back, where the horribleness seemed to be concentrated the most strongly, because that was where ne'd been grabbed the hardest, but ne had no idea how the heck ne was supposed to do anything about that without just

getting in the shower, which...

Okay, now that ne thought of it...was an extremely tempting idea.

It still literally felt like their hands were all over rix, their arms wrapping around rix like constricting snakes. Ne could still feel the lines of pressure across riv shoulders and back. Riv skin was crawling like nothing ne'd ever felt before. If ne got in the shower, ne could use the luffa to scrub at riv skin more effectively than with riv hands, so maybe that would help. Maybe the scratchiness would replace the feeling of pressure and heat.

It would be rude to shower while riv friends were waiting, but at the moment ne didn't really care about being polite or not.

Ne glanced back at May, who'd stopped in the doorway to the bathroom, and was just standing there, currently staring up towards the ceiling with a gobsmacked expression. Pandora glanced up to see what she was looking at, but didn't see anything different from the usual. The vaulted ceiling was just the same as always.

“Hey.” Ne said, and could hear for rixelf how /not okay/ riv voice sounded. Ne sounded almost as bad as ne felt. “I'm just going to get in the shower to see if that helps, can you let everyone else know I'll

be out soon?”

May jumped, like she'd forgotten ne was there, then nodded. “Yes, I'll tell everyone.” She said. She twisted her hands together in front of her, and said, “I'm sorry again for what happened, Calem. Usually everyone's a lot better at asking before they touch someone, but with all the excitement...I guess they forgot that not everyone enjoys being touched.” To Pandora's shock, there was a heavy current of bitterness in her usually cheerful voice, which ne had never heard before. Ne thought this was the first time ne'd ever seen her upset at their friends.

But if Pandora was understanding the situation correctly, she also experienced the same sort of things ne had just felt for the first time when she was touched, so if she'd already gone through the effort of getting their friends to respect her personal space, then ne could understand why she would be so upset about them hugging rix without getting permission first.

What ne still couldn't understand was how ne'd been so successfully lied to riv entire life. The movies and shows made group hugs look like the most awesome, relaxing thing in the world. Books always described them as healing and cathartic and wonderful. The reality was that they were an absolutely horrific nightmare. Who the hell

had decided to tell this lie? Was ne really expected to believe that people /enjoyed/ hugs when they felt /like that/?

But May had called it something. What had she called it? Touch-something. Ne couldn't remember, and she'd already turned to leave the room, so ne couldn't ask unless ne wanted to chase after her.

But the sensation of hands were /still/ branded on riv skin, and ne thought the hot water and soap had helped a little for riv hands. Ne told the door to shut and lock, then began to strip out of riv clothes as quickly as possible, wanting to wash away the sensations if ne could.

Ne turned on the shower to its hottest setting with all of riv favorite scented soaps activated, grabbed the luffa and tried to once again physically scrub away the touches ne could still feel lingering. If ne closed riv eyes, it felt like ne was still surrounded, still being hugged. Ne tried to turn the water temperature up higher, only for the automatic safety controls to inform rix that it wasn't allowed. Ne sighed, and stuck riv face under the spray to let the water hit riv face instead.

At least there was one good thing about this experience.

Now ne knew to never, ever, ever accept a hug, ever, as long as ne lived.

029: “*Blurry Shape at Corner of Eye*”

Neopronouns: heart/hearts/heartself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with heart

Replace its with hearts

Replace itself with heartself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Heart is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as heart gets a fence set up around hearts yard so the puppy can go outside without heart having to walk it. Hearts uncle is going to help set up the

fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting heart use, since heart lost hearts. Heart's going to buy toys and train the puppy heartself."

029: “Blurry Shape at Corner of Eye”

It started as something heart saw out of the corner of hearts right eye, right at the very edge, where heart couldn't make out any of the details. It was just a grey blur, and almost entirely beyond hearts ability to perceive it, like a shadow.

It was mildly annoying and weird, but didn't scream “I'm dying and need to go to the emergency room immediately”, so heart ignored it.

For weeks, the grey shadow didn't change in any noticeable way, and after the first three days, heart stopped noticing it at all. It began to fade into the background, something heart only noticed if heart was already thinking about it, the way you usually didn't think about seeing your nose, even though for most people, you saw it all the time.

It became a fact of life, no more worth thinking about than the outline of hearts glasses.

But then, one day, almost a month after the first time heart saw it, heart suddenly realized that it had changed. It had moved. The shape was bigger, no longer right at the very edge of hearts vision, but still near it. Heart still couldn't see any details, but now it was starting to

block part of hearts vision.

Heart was at home when it happened, so heart ran to the bathroom and stared into the mirror with wide eyes, afraid of what heart would see.

But there was nothing. Hearts right eye looked exactly the same as it always did, and so did the left. They weren't bloodshot, and no matter how closely heart peered, heart couldn't see anything odd or different or wrong about hearts reflection. Hearts eyes were still brown, just like always.

But every time heart moved hearts eyes, the shape followed, like it was stuck to hearts eye, or like the interface in a video game, always staying centered with the camera.

Nothing hurt, so, trying not to panic too much, heart went online to look it up, hoping heart wouldn't see “yeah you're definitely dying, have fun with that” as the top result.

That was not the top result when heart typed into the search bar, “Blurry shape at corner of eye”.

No.

No, heart probably wasn't dying.

Heart probably wouldn't die for at least a couple hundred more years.

This was not a disease or an injury.

This was possession.

Heart had been chosen as a vessel for one of the wild ones, and it was going to, slowly but surely, take heart over from the inside out, until heart wasn't the one seeing the shape at the corner of heart eye, but the blurry shape slowly fading out of sight until heart was nothing but a memory.

It was too soon to tell which wild one had claimed heart. It was a grey blur, that was all heart could tell. Heart couldn't make out any features – ears, stripes, spots, horns or antlers, nothing.

If the charts were reliable, heart had probably five more months until hearts transformation was complete. By this time mid April, heart would no longer be human. Hearts entire personality would be changed and erased into something else. Heart would have walked away from hearts job and everyone who knew heart, without a

second glance backward.

All heart could do was sit there, staring at hearts computer screen, reading the words over and over again.

How could this be happening to heart? Out of all the people on Terra, why did it have to happen to heart? Why did it happen to heart? Heart wasn't anyone special, heart wasn't descended from anyone important, heart wasn't even particularly good with animals!

But none of that mattered.

Heart had been chosen as the host to one of the wild ones, and soon enough, heart wouldn't even be upset about it anymore, because the spirit's personality would have overridden hearts own, smoothing away all hearts worries and fears and anger into calm acceptance.

No matter how hard heart tried, no matter how heart stared, heart couldn't make out any distinguishing features on the blur in hearts vision.

Only time would tell.

And by the time heart could tell, heart would no longer care.

030: Boundaries are Made to be Respected, a short touch-averse horror story

Neopronouns: clo/loc/(locs)/clockself which follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself

Replace she with clo

Replace her with loc

Replace hers with locs

Replace herself with clockself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Clo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as clo gets a fence

set up around loc yard so the puppy can go outside without loc having to walk it. Loc uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting loc use, since clo lost locs. Clo's going to buy toys and train the puppy clockself."

* * *

ri/riv/rivs/riverself, which will follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with ri

Replace him with riv

Replace his with rivs

Replace himself with riverself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ri is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ri gets a fence set up around rivs yard so the puppy can go outside without riv having to walk it. Rivs uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting riv use, since ri lost rivs. Ri's going to buy toys and train the puppy riverself."

030: Boundaries are Made to be Respected, a short touch-averse Horror story.

Edie was reading on loc phone in the living room, loc legs stretched out in front of loc, loc back propped up on loc favorite pillow against one arm of the couch, when, out of the corner of loc eye, clo saw loc friend and roommate appear in the doorway that led first to the kitchen, then the hallway that led to their bedrooms and the bathroom.

Callery didn't do anything else or say anything, so Edie didn't pay riv any mind, assuming ri was looking at something on rivs own phone, and just continued reading the February 1930 edition of Astounding Stories of Super Science on loc phone, courtesy of Gutenberg.org.

The giant beetle army was advancing across the skies of Australia, and Edie was honestly shocked and horrified by the carnage that was unfolding. Clo had expected this story to be adventurous, sure, but hadn't actually expected to be thrown into the midst of a legitimate, horrifying apocalypse with people actually dying “on screen”, so to say. Why hadn't anyone adapted this to a TV show or something yet? This was horrifying. Clo couldn't look away.

So clo kept reading, and after less than a minute, clo had completely

forgot loc friend was still standing in the doorway, completely absorbed as clo was by the ending half of The Beetle Horde. It almost seemed hopeless, but something had to give, right? This wasn't sustainable, so it had to end naturally soon, because nothing in nature would exist with this level of unbalance with the rest of the ecosystem--

“Hey.” Callery's voice came suddenly, deadly serious, and Edie was knocked out of loc thoughts and the book. Immediately, clo felt loc heart freeze in dread, and this time not because of the giant beetles that seemed like they were going to destroy all of humanity. No, this time it was because that was not the kind of tone of voice you used to deliver good news.

Edie lowered loc phone, and lifted loc gaze toward the doorway of the living room, turning Callery's form from a blur at the corner of loc eye into the fully detailed reality.

Leanda was standing there leaning against the doorway, wearing rivs favorite purple hoodie with rivs hands shoved into the front pocket, and rivs dark green and gold flannel pajama pants, with rivs feet bare on the carpeting. Rivs brown hair was undone from its usual ponytail, and was pushed back behind rivs ears, falling in a rippling wave down rivs back. Rivs expression was serious, and ri was

staring straight at Edie with rivs cool but disconcerting electric blue eyes.

Edie sat up, alarmed, shoved loc phone into loc pocket so it'd be out of the way, and swung loc feet onto the floor, for a moment irrationally worrying that Callery was about to announce that giant gods damned beetles were attacking Australia, before the much more logical, and likely anxieties cut in. "What's wrong?" Clo demanded, "What happened?" Had Amie died? Was someone else in the hospital? Had Callery caught Covid19? Were they both probably going to die now despite all their precautions?

To loc consternation, Callery didn't answer immediately, just looked down at the floor, rivs hands visibly fidgeting inside the giant hoodie pocket, until finally ri looked up again. "I need to ask you a favor." Ri said, still in that horribly serious tone of voice, staring directly into Edie's eyes.

Callery's contact-assisted electric blue eyes were sharp and clear, determined and intense.

Edie couldn't look away. Clo felt like clo was pinned into place like a bug under a microscope.

“What kind of favor?” Clo managed to ask, now even more alarmed than before. This was not the way loc friend normally behaved. What in the world could ri possibly want?

Again, Callery didn't answer immediately. Instead, ri strode fully into the room, around the coffee table, and then sat down right next to Edie on loc couch. Right next to loc. Literally on the cushion right next to loc.

Now clo was really afraid, and even more frozen. Why was Callery doing this? Ri knew Edie hated being this close to other people, that was why clo had a whole couch just to clockself. Clo found clockself leaning away from loc roommate, into the pillow clo'd been leaning so comfortably on just a minute before, and still, Callery didn't move away, didn't get the hint, even though Edie could see rivs eyes watching loc. Callery had to know how intensely uncomfortable Edie felt right now, how trapped ri was making clo feel, but ri wasn't doing anything to move away or apologize.

They had had many frank, in-depth discussions about Edie's boundaries and personal space bubble before they ever moved in together. Callery had sworn over and over again to respect them, not to press loc in any way. Ri had agreed that Edie's couch was Edie's alone, ri'd only use it with permission. Ri would never try to sit next

to Edie, and would not only never touch Edie without permission, but never /even/ ask Edie to let riv touch loc. The only time they would ever touch was if Edie initiated it clockself, which, Edie assured riv, would literally be never, unless there was some sort of life or death emergency.

(Clo didn't know how to perform CPR, but if Callery was ever unconscious, clo would do loc best to revive riv. And the same thing if the apartment ever caught on fire. If Callery were hurt or unconscious, Edie would try to drag riv out, or even try to carry riv if clo had to.)

So why for the love of all that was sacred was Callery doing to to loc?

Clo could barely get the words out. “What kind of favor?” Clo repeated, already sure clo knew the answer, and dreading it. There was no other favor Callery could be about to ask loc for that would involve betraying loc like this.

Clo'd thought clo could trust Callery.

“I know you're going to hate me, I'm such a horrible person for asking,” Callery began, and yeah, Edie was really, really beginning

to hate riv just for that tone of voice and the manipulative way ri was phrasing this. Callery continued, supposedly oblivious to how much ri was stressing loc out by saying this, “I know, you said you don't ever want to be touched, but, Edie, I'm really feeling touch starved right now, and I wanted to ask you if we could re-negotiate on your boundaries.”

And to think, Edie'd been having so much horrified fun just a minute or two ago. Now the horror was real.

Callery was so close Edie could smell the peppermint on rivs breath from the bag of dinner mints Edie'd gotten riv at the store as a random present, since clo knew ri loved them.

“What?” It was all Edie could think to say, because everything about this situation was horrifying, even more horrifying than the thought of giant beetles destroying the world. Re-negotiate on loc boundaries? There was no fucking way to negotiate on not being touched, except to be touched!

“I want to negotiate,” Callery repeated, and unless it was Edie's imagination, ri seemed like ri'd moved even closer. “See if we can find a middle-ground where where both our needs are being accommodated for. I'm just feeling so lonely, I really just need

someone to touch me. With the lockdowns, I can't get it from anyone else, you're my only option left.”

Edie's mind was almost blank with rage and betrayal. This was exactly the kind of thing clo'd never wanted to happen. This was the exact sort of thing clo'd set up loc extremely strict and clear boundaries to prevent.

And here Callery was, trampling all over them, and trying to make Edie feel bad about setting them up in the first place. It had seemed too good to be true when Callery had so readily agreed to respect Edie's personal space all those months ago when clo'd decided to let Callery move in with loc, and now Edie could see why it had been so easy for Callery to nod along and say the right words - - ri hadn't actually meant any of them.

It was easy to make a promise you had no intention of keeping.

Edie's heart was pounding in loc chest, and loc hands were beginning to tingle. Either loc was about to have a panic attack, or loc was really just that angry. Or both. How was clo supposed to be able to tell the difference?

“Get away from me.” Clo said, and it was a struggle to keep loc

voice even, when what clo really wanted to do was snarl. “You are way too close. Back up.”

Callery's mouth twitched, and Edie had no idea what kind of expression almost crossed rivs face.

But ri lifted riverself slightly, and backed up...but only by a few inches.

Edie didn't know what expression was on loc face when clo realized that that was as far as Callery was going to move, but Callery reacted to it by lifting rivs hands, palms forward, as though pleading with a wild animal. “Come on, Edie,” Ri said, “I'm not asking for much, and you don't know what it's like, being touch starved. I'm really suffering here, it's making my depression even worse. Can't we just, I don't know, hold hands or something? Don't look at me like that, why can't we talk about this like mature adults? You've got to learn to compromise.”

“Letting you touch me isn't a compromise!” Edie snapped. That would literally just be Callery getting everything ri wanted, and Edie losing everything clo needed. Clo shoved clocself further back into the arm of the couch, suddenly acutely aware of the fact that clo was quite literally trapped. The way the coffee table had one edge against

the wall, the only way for clo to move away from Callery if ri stayed where ri was, would be for clo to literally climb on top of the table to get away.

Callery had to be aware of this. There was no way ri couldn't be. Ri'd known what ri was doing the moment ri decided to sit down right next to Edie on loc couch, tearing straight through loc personal space like it was made of tissue paper.

“Go pet Spot!” Clo snarled, feeling too many things at once to process them all. Loc heart was still racing in loc chest, and loc head was starting to hurt, too. Clo could no longer feel loc hands. Was this anxiety? Rage? Clo couldn't tell the difference, and it didn't matter.

This conversation shouldn't be happening. This didn't have to fucking happen. How fucking dare Callery do this to loc, after making such a big show of caring about loc, after promising to respect loc boundaries.

It was so fucking simple, all ri had to do was not fucking touch loc. It was so fucking simple, didn't require any effort at all. All ri had to fucking do was actually respect Edie's boundaries, but no, no.

Callery opened rivs mouth to say something, but Edie cut riv off, too

overwhelmed to even pretend to play nice. “If you're so fucking desperate to touch someone, go pet Spot, she'd fucking love it, and there's no way in hell I'm letting you touch me. Go pet the gods damned cat!”

But Callery shook rivi's head forcefully, and sighed loudly. “It's not the same as with a person.” Ri said, leaning forward like that was going to do anything to help the situation at all. “It's about the human connection.”

Edie had already been seriously contemplating the idea of punching riv in the face, and that was almost the final straw. “Well, good thing I'm not human!” Clo exclaimed, “Go find your damned human connection somewhere else! Like Robin, you know, your partner? Or did they just suddenly cease to exist?”

“The lockdown - -”

“He lives right across the parking lot! You had them over literally two days ago!”

“He went to visit their sister!” Callery slapped riv's hands down on riv's thighs, clearly starting to get frustrated with Edie's unwillingness to just give in to riv's demands. Ri clearly hadn't been

expecting a fight, ri'd just thought Edie would roll over and do what ri wanted as long as ri put on a sad face while asking. Ri huffed out a sigh, then visibly composed riverself, only to then immediately let rivs face fall back into a sad expression. "Come on," Ri said, voice lowered like that would make what ri was asking less inherently offensive, "You know I have seasonal depression, it's really kicking my ass right now. Is it really too much to ask for you to comfort your depressed friend? We can just hold hands, whatever you're comfortable with."

Whatever clo was comfortable with??

While clo was sputtering with rage at the audacity, Callery decided that ri was going to reach out towards loc shoulder with one hand.

That was it. That was Edie's limit.

The TV remote was the closest thing nearby that wasn't invaluable, sitting on the back of the sofa, so faster than clo ever thought clo'd moved before, clo snatched it up, and slammed it down on Callery's reaching hand, right across rivs knuckles.

Then clo made a flying leap over the coffee table, and miraculously managed to avoid tripping over it or slamming into the TV directly

opposite. Spinning on loc heel, clo made a split second calculation, and, ignoring the front door, swung instead through the door frame, into the kitchen, the tiled floor cold beneath loc bare feet, through the next door, then dashed down the short hallway and into loc room on the left side, turning to slam the door shut behind loc as soon as clo was inside, twisting the lock on the handle as clo did so.

It was just the simple kind of lock you turned on the doorknob, and clo had figured out how to easily open them as a kid using a penny. Literally all you had to do was fit the penny into the slot on the other side of the doorknob, and turn it, and the door would be unlocked.

All clo had in the way of real furniture in loc room was a short bookshelf that was only half filled with books, so clo immediately dragged it over across the carpet, and shoved it flat against the door.

Clo didn't know if Callery would try to get in or not. Clo didn't even know if Callery knew the trick to opening locks like this. But if Callery did manage to get in somehow past the bookshelf, Edie had plenty of spray paint to use to defend clockself, because all loc craft supplies were kept in the plastic drawers next to loc bed. Clo went over, ripped the drawer open, and snatched out the first one loc hand found - - neon yellow.

It was then that Edie realized that Spot was half-crouched right there on on loc bed, staring up at loc with wide, frightened eyes, everything about her posture screaming fear.

It was because Edie had slammed the door so hard, and maybe if Spot had heard any of their shouting. Edie was still in the midst of what was probably a panic attack, but clo did loc best to make loc voice come out soft and soothing as clo reassured almost entirely on automatic, “Hey, Spot, it's okay, it's alright, pretty kitty, you don't need to be scared, I'm not mad at you, it's alright.”

Clo wiggled loc fingers towards Spot to reassure her, and was rewarded with Spot's body language almost instantly relaxing out of her tense posture, though she was still slightly wary.

“Good girl, good kitty.” Edie reassured again, trying to calm loc own self down. Loc hands were shaking as clo pulled loc phone out of loc pocket, just to make sure loc still had it, thanking every god ever worshiped that clo'd thought to put it in loc pocket in the first place, rather than just leaving it sit on the couch. Clo didn't know what clo would have done if clo'd been trapped in here without loc phone.

It had been a calculated risk, choosing to run for loc room instead of out the front door. Clo was barefoot, and wearing shorts and a tank

top, it was forty degrees outside, and the sun hadn't even set yet, so it would only get colder. If Callery locked loc out, there would be no other options than freezing if what Callery'd said about Robin going to visit his sister was true.

There were no sounds of pursuit, no angry banging or self-pitying pleads for forgiveness from the door, so hopefully Callery was too busy crying over rivs hopefully bruised knuckles to chase loc down.

Still shaking, Edie went over to loc bed and gently sat down so clo could lean against the wall. Spot gave an almost silent 'mmow' in greeting, and immediately got to her feet to come over and curl up next to Edie's leg, rolling over onto her back to bare her soft, cream-colored belly trustingly.

Edie obliged by gently rubbing loc hand up and down Spot's belly, feeling her purr under loc hand. Most cats hated having their belly rubbed, but apparently no one had ever told Spot that, because she seemed to think she was a dog. She was by far the weirdest cat Edie had ever rescued.

Edie sighed.

Clo had set loc boundaries the way clo had for a reason.

Many people treated the idea that every person needed regular physical contact with other people as a universal fact, sacrosanct and unchallengable.

Those people hadn't met Edie, for whom physical touching from other people, and even animals if it went on long enough, caused physical pain.

Edie hadn't woken up one day and decided to punish everyone around loc by withholding physical affection, but that was sure how literally everyone clo'd ever been friends or family with acted about it.

Everyone insisted on taking the fact that physical touch literally hurt loc as a personal attack on themselves, or loc trust in them, no matter how many times clo explained that it literally didn't matter who it was, or how much clo liked them, it was all equally horrible to experience. It was literally nothing personal.

Clo had made that clear, too, to Callery when clo agreed to let riv move into loc apartment. And Callery had pretended to agree, pretended to accept it. Had nodded along and said all the nice words that Edie had been all too happy to hear.

But it had been a lie. Clo should have known better than to expect the level of compassion Callery had pretended to offer. Callery was just as selfish as everyone else Edie had ever met. Callery thought ri was owed Edie's body, owed Edie's touch, just like everyone else who had ever demanded a hug or a handshake or any other kind of physical “affection” from loc.

It literally had nothing to do with the person, and everything to do with the fact that it hurt. It felt bad.

Half the time Spot tried to sit with loc, Edie literally had to pick her up and move her somewhere else, because if Spot leaned against loc arm the way she usually wanted to, loc whole arm, all the way up to loc shoulder, would start to ache horribly, and it would stay painful for a long time afterward.

Sometimes clo was willing to put up with it to keep Spot happy, because clo was just so overjoyed to have so thoroughly gained Spot's trust in the first place, clo didn't want to do anything that would make Spot think clo didn't like her.

Because Spot was a cat, she didn't understand the concept of boundaries, she'd never agreed not to touch Edie unless loc initiated the touch first. Spot was just a cat, she was literally incapable of

breaking Edie's trust, or understanding that when Edie moved her away, it wasn't because Edie didn't like her.

The same could not be said of loc roommate.

Clo didn't know what Callery would try to do next, if ri would try to pressure Edie again, if ri would beg for forgiveness, or if ri would just pretend the whole thing hadn't happened at all, pretend ri hadn't betrayed Edie at all, and tried to guilt-trip loc into agreeing to hurt clockself.

But Edie knew one thing for sure. By this time tomorrow, clo would no longer have a roommate. Clo had managed to pay the rent on loc own for a full year before she met Callery, clo would manage it again without rivs help. Clo would never be able to trust riv ever again, not after today, not even with a million apologies and promises that it would never happen again.

Clo had already been fed that line in the past too many times to believe it now. Callery had gotten rivs chance, and instead of taking it, ri had decided to burn it to the ground.

This time tomorrow, Edie would no longer have a roommate. And that was perfectly fine with loc. Clo was happier on loc own,

anyways. Interacting with Callery every single day had been wearing on loc nerves for months. This was the final straw.

Callery could move in with Robin, if they were still willing to date riv once he found out what ri'd done. Their other roommate had moved out two weeks ago, there was no longer any point in Callery staying with Edie instead.

Some of the anger and anxiety was starting to drain away, and Edie shifted so clo could lean back against loc pillows and stretch loc legs out in front of loc, the way clo'd been lying before loc now ex-friend ex-roommate had decided to interrupt.

Clo turned loc phone back on, and selected the book again, hoping that the horrors of the beetle apocalypse would be enough to distract loc from the much worse horrors of real life.

If Callery decided to break loc door down, clo would spray-paint riv in the face when ri did that, but until that happened, clo was going to try to calm down and try to enjoy clockself.

[[Ships were found drifting in the Indian Ocean, totally destitute of crews and passengers...]]

031: Alterhuman Advancements: December 2122

Neopronouns: vey/vem/veir/(veirs)/veirself, which follow the same rules as they/them/their/(theirs)/themselves

Replace they with vey

Replace them with vem

Replace their with veir

Replace theirs with veirs

Replace themselves with veirself

EX:

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

Becomes:

"Vey are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as vey get a fence set up around veir yard so the puppy can go outside without vem having to walk it. Veir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vem use, since vey lost veirs. Vey're going to buy toys and train the puppy veirself."

031: Alterhuman Advancements: December 2122

“Alright,” Dr. Bird said, “Now I want you to stretch your arms over your head, as high as you can reach without hurting yourself. We want to make sure the fur covers everything equally, and I need to know if the movement hurts at all. I'm going to set a thirty second timer, try to keep your arms up the whole time if you can, but stop if anything hurts at all.”

Canidae was pretty confident it wouldn't hurt, considering the poses vey'd already held while getting veir friends to take pictures of vem, not to mention vey had already checked vemself over in the bathroom mirror to look at veir new fur.

But vey still did as vey was told, stretching veir arms up high up towards the ceiling. Vey flexed veir paws, sheathing and unsheathing veir claws as vey did so, no less overjoyed at the ability now than vey had been when vey first woke up after the surgery.

(Well, once vey had actually been lucid after waking up from the surgery. The first two hours of being awake were still a bit of a confused, foggy blur from the lingering affects of the anesthetics.)

Dr. Bird paced a circle around vem, examined vem from the front,

each side, and the back, then said, when he was standing in front of vem again, smiling with his pointed teeth, “Alright, you can lower your arms again, that was perfect. Any pain at all? Any sensation of tightness of the skin? Anything feel uncomfortable at all?”

“Nope.” Canidae replied cheerfully, unwilling to stop veir tail from wagging. There was nothing fragile nearby, so there was no reason to suppress it. The new long, beautifully iridescent maroon fur on veir tail made a soft swishing noise as it went through the air.

Dr. Bird smiled at the moment. “I'm guessing this means there's no problems adjusting to your new tail?”

Canidae let veir tail wag harder as part of veir answer: “Nope!” And just to prove vey could control it, vey lifted one hand to demonstrate, closing veir fist when vey stopped veir tail from moving, and opening it again when vey let it wag again. “See? Perfect control!”

The hand signals were used in very early training for new limbs, to get you used to the idea that the thing attached to you was under your control the same way your hand was.

Dr. Bird nodded, still smiling, and the fluorescent lights in the ceiling reflected off his orange, yellow, and black scales. Dr. Bird's

species was, in his own words, “Best described simply as a dragon, so as not to arouse any fury in my very good friend, Jim Dodd, who is extremely passionate about paleontology and would become extremely irritated with me if I went around telling people I was a dinosaur when my alterations take inspiration from several dozen species of dinosaur and other ancient species, rather than just one single species of dinosaur. Trust me. You do not want to see Jim fired up about paleontology.”.

Canidae didn't know enough about actual dinosaurs to figure out which species Dr. Bird had incorporated, or exactly how he'd done so, but vey took him at his word.

Most of Dr. Bird's exposed skin (which meant his face, neck, and hands, at the moment, because he was wearing his lab coat) was covered in shiny orange-gold scales, with stripes and spots of yellow and black.

Canidae knew, from seeing him on the fourth edition of *Alterhuman Advancements*, where Dr. Bird had taken a selfie underwater with some sharks, that he had plates of black scales on his torso and belly, which extended all the way from the point of his chin down to the tip of his tail.

His tail was almost as long as his torso, and similar to an alligator's, but with a fin running down the top center of it that he could lower and raise at will, helping him swim more efficiently. His face was a long, sturdy, lizard-like muzzle, with small ridges over his nostrils, and larger ridges around his eyes. His face was the same orange-gold as most of the rest of him, except for right around his eyes, where it was black, with four thin lines tracing to the end of his nose, almost like a zebra, or a skink.

He had kept his hair, and modified the left half of it so that it grew out bright yellow to match the spots on his scales, while the right half was still its natural black. His eyes, complete with reptilian slitted pupils, were bright gold, and always friendly.

His smile, too, was already ready and friendly, even now that it was filled with sharp teeth. It was part of the reason Canidae had chosen Dr. Bird to perform veir alterations, aside from the fact that he was probably /the/ top alterist in the world.

It had taken three months of waiting to get veir appointment for the alteration surgery, and the wait had been worth it. It had taken that long for Dr. Bird to design and create the bases and codes for Canidae's ears, tail, fur, and, most complicatedly, veir new muzzle, complete with functioning nose, tongue, taste buds, teeth, and all the

nerve ending and muscles and too many complicated things for Canidae to remember the names of.

Veir vision had also been improved, so vey would no longer have to wear glasses just to see anything more than two inches away from veir nose. Well, veir old nose – the new one was much longer, so without the eye adjustments vey probably wouldn't even be able to focus on veir own nose, let alone see anything further away than it.

Vey were still getting used to the fact that vey could see things in detail the moment vey woke up in the morning, and didn't have to worry about taking veir glasses off at night or before they got in the shower. And now vey could go swimming and still be able to see! Vey would finally be able to go to the beach and actually get in the water and still be able to see veir friends and the people on the shore!

And the smells! Not only did veir new nose reduce veir oversensitivity to strong chemical smells by actively filtering them before they could cause pain, it warned vem when dangerous fumes were in the air even if they weren't something vey would have been able to notice before. It would also tell vem when food was starting to go bad, and when it was safe to eat, so vey wouldn't have to stress about leftovers that had been in the fridge for a few days.

But veir favorite thing was, by no contest at all, the fur. Vey could change the colors and patterns anytime vey wanted, and the default had been picked out inch by inch while vey'd been waiting for the final day of veir appointment.

Most of veir fur was deep red, real red, not the orange you saw on actual foxes. That was the base color. Then, starting on the top of veir muzzle, tracing down veir throat and to veir belly, was pastel blue and green, fading in and out in a gentle gradient. Around veir eyes, now pastel green with a circle of white stars around the pupil, was a mask of pastel orange that faded to yellow, and traced its way up to their ears before fading to red again.

The longer hair vey'd kept on the top of veir head was undercut, and set so it would always be parted to one side. It was stark white, with a few streaks of cyan just for fun.

They hadn't grown in just yet, but soon, vey would have the first stages of grown on veir antlers, and vey would be able to customize their shape and final size as they grew in.

Vey could have just gotten attachable antlers like with veir ears, but vey wanted the experience of growing them veirself, and having Dr. Bird be the one to create them was an opportunity too good to pass

up. Dr. Bird had been the alterist to design and create Altera's wings, the first functioning wings of any cyberfurry, and had helped invent the alteration technology in the first place.

Canidae's antlers would be another first for the technology, and vey couldn't wait to see how they turned out. Even if they never got to full size, it would still be a technological breakthrough, and Canidae could always have them removed and switched out for a moddable base vey could attach any antlers or horns they wanted to.

Technically, vey could have stopped wagging veir tail any time vey wanted, but over the course of the rest of the appointment - - Dr. Bird running them through a checklist of tests to make sure everything was working the way it should, with a break every hour and lunch provided at no cost, where vey got to hear stories about the adventures Dr. Bird and his friend Jim had gone on together - - veir tail kept wagging the whole time.

This had definitely been worth the wait.

032: Real Heroes Kill Cops

Neopronouns: su/[na]/uvu/lo/(ka)/zeda.

Na replaces contractions with "su", so rather than saying "Su's a superhero" they way you'd say "He's a superhero", you say "Na a superhero".

Ka is used the same way "hers" is, so if you'd use "hers" like, "The house is hers" you'd say "The house is ka"

Replace he with su

Replace contractions of su with na

Replace him with vem

Replace his with veir

Replace hers with ka

Replace himself with zeda

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence

set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Su is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as su gets a fence set up around lo yard so the puppy can go outside without uvu having to walk it. Lo uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting uvu use, since su lost ka. Na going to buy toys and train the puppy zeda."

032: Real Heroes Kill Cops

* * *

Rebecca Washington, alias Constitution.

* * *

Constitution smirked, one foot planted firmly on one of the thug's backs, the other on another one's hand, and crossed her arms over her chest as she tilted her head to the side, examining the third one still in front of her, lo back pressed to the wall, with nowhere to escape.

She didn't know the ones she was currently standing on, so they were either new in town, or at least newly stupid, if they thought they could get away with this crap under her watch.

But this cowering worm? Oh, she knew uvu.

“Theria,” She pretended to sigh reprovably, “how many times do we have to go over this? Did you really forget the last lesson I taught you already? ”

She spun her baton casually through her fingers, and saw Theria tense further into the wall in a very satisfying way. So su hadn't forgotten, then, su was just being purposefully irritating to ruin Constitution's night.

Theria didn't answer, just glared in silence, even though Constitution could see su was trembling, despite the warm night.

“What, no reply?” She teased, “Is this any way to treat an old friend?”

Theria's only response was to bare lo teeth, like su really was the wild animal lo name claimed su was.

Constitution rolled her eyes. Both Theria's friends were unconscious, and still su was silent as the grave. No matter how many times Constitution hit uvu, su never answered any of her questions.

It was infuriating. Usually, Constitution always got the answers she wanted in any interrogation of criminals. But not with Theria.

Lo cronies always claimed su was nonverbal and couldn't speak, but Constitution refused to accept it, and was determined to prove them all wrong.

She spun the baton over her head, and stepped forward onto the cracked pavement. Theria's eyes never left hers, still glaring in silent defiance.

“Well,” She mused, already enjoying what was about to happen for the umpteenth time, “I guess we just have to go over it again, don't we? Really, I mean, what did you think was going to happen? Setting a bomb? Really? Did you really think you could get away with trying to blow up the detention facility?”

She hefted the baton in one hand, preparing to strike the [adjective?] over the head- -

- -And had only a moment to realize with confusion that Theria's bared teeth had transformed from a snarl, into something that looked like a smile.

* * *

Theria

* * *

The moment Constitution was no longer touching Vanny or Eight, the moment both her feet were on the broken road, Theria let go of

the wall of force na been holding back since su heard Constitution's theme music approaching from the air.

Theria's purple energy exploded into the air before the supercop had any time to react, and engulfed her in a ring of power that shot up from the ground and into the sky like a beacon, illuminating the storm clouds in all directions and burning all the nearby colors into shades of purple and magenta.

At the same time, Theria could feel the almost familiar wings sprouting from lo back, and the long, draconic muzzle extending forward from lo face, filled to the brim with razor sharp teeth. Horns stretched out from the top of lo head, and su could feel the powerful tail whipping through the air behind uvu, the heavy weight at the end of it a spiked club that was reassuring in its power. Purple flames wreathed lo arms and legs like a living cloak.

Su could feel the circle of power from the trap na set eating away at Constitution's form, the energy rushing through uvu from that song echoing at the edge of lo mind in an almost endless river, all of it surging straight into the circle, trying to overcome Constitution's unexpected resistance, all of it driven by pure instinct.

This was the first time Theria had used lo powers like this against a

real living thing, and su was dismayed to see that it was more difficult to destroy something that was alive than it had been to destroy the stack of books na tried it on first.

So maybe lo powers were less like anti-matter and more like...

Well... okay, su didn't know what to compare it to, but it wasn't as efficient as na hoped it would be from how dramatic it looked, and how easily the shitty books su regretted buying had been disintegrated.

The magical purple energy that surged and sparked like electricity certainly /looked/ like it could kill someone in two seconds flat, but apparently not.

Finally, Theria felt the resistance give way, and /felt/ the energy completely consume Constitution, wiping her out of existence, with not even any dust to leave behind.

And then there was a strange sensation, like a spark of static electricity, only inside Theria's mind instead of on lo hand.

And just as instinctively as su knew how to use the purple energy, Theria now knew, somehow, that su had absorbed an ability from

Constitution. Not from her amour or her flash baton, but from /her/.

/A healing ability./ The instinct seemed to whisper in Theria's mind.

Su let the beam of energy dissipate, and the darkness of the night swept back in, leaving uvu squinting into the dark for a few seconds before lo eyes began to adjust, allowing uvu to see Vanny and Eight's still unconscious forms lying on the cracked pavement.

Constitution had hit them both with her accursed baton, but she hadn't said what setting it was on, and it was too dark to see if they were still breathing. Maybe this was the final strike. Theria lunged forward, reaching for Eight's neck.

Ler skin was still warm, and it took a few frantic seconds to find a pulse. Vanny was the same.

Theria was just about to try out lo new healing ability to try and revive them when a familiar sound reached lo ears, sending a spike of dread and anger through lo heart.

Wings of Justice's theme.

He'd probably been alerted by the flare of light, or maybe Constitutions armour had sent out a distress signal. Either way, he'd

be looking for a fight, like always. And if he knew Theria'd killed Constitution, all bets were off.

Trying to revive Vanny and Eight now would just put them in more danger, especially if su failed. Veris would be on her way any minute now, with whatever reinforcements she'd been able to find.

Theria needed to take the fight to Wings of Justice. The music was approaching rapidly. There wasn't even any time to drag lo friends to safety.

Su stood, and backed away from lo friends. Then su stretched out the wings on lo back, extending them to their fullest for the first time, guided only by the strange new instinct that seemed like a whisper in lo ear, guiding lo movements.

Su crouched, lifted lo wings, then leapt while shoving downward against the air.

Su shot into the sky, with shocking speed and ease, and somehow, su knew exactly what su needed to do. Su spun towards the sound of Wings of Justice's approach, and saw him shooting closer like a comet with a trail of red, white, and blue from his jetpack and wings.

Killing Constitution hadn't been enough to cool the rage that seemed to have taken up permanent residence inside Theria's veins. The flames surrounding uvu flared even higher, and su let out a primal shriek of wrath that rang out through the sky like a physical force.

Wings of Justice faltered in the air, and Theria shot forward as fast as su could, determined that by the time the sun rose, the shadow of injustice would never fall over anyone ever again.

Not if su had anything to say about it.

033: Customer Service

Neopronouns: xiy/rik/ix/sirav which follow the same rules as he/him

Replace he with xiy

Replace him with rik

Replace his with ix

Replace himself with sirav

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xiy is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xiy gets a fence set up around ix yard so the puppy can go outside without rik having to walk it. Ix uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a

set of power tools he's letting rik use, since xiy lost ix. Xiy's going to buy toys and train the puppy sirav."

033: Customer Service

“Excuse me, */what/*?”

Cloud knew better than to expect anything except this sort of reaction. Tiffany wouldn't be Tiffany if she reacted any other way.

Xiy resisted the urge to sigh, and repeated with irritation that was difficult to conceal, “I don't hate it. Why should I?”

Tiffany stared at rik, her blue eyes wide and shocked.

Her red mask with strawberries on it thankfully hid her mouth from view, because xiy had flat out refused to even touch any of her items until she put her mask on properly, but xiy could only assume it was dropped open to match the rest of her scandalized expression. “But-” She seemed at a loss for words. Her white skin turned slightly red as she got worked up. “But it's a nightmare! You're turning into a monster!”

Yeah, this was why Cloud tried to avoid Tiffany whenever xiy could. Unfortunately xiy couldn't do anything about it this time. Tiffany had probably sought rik out, knowing xiy couldn't escape this time.

Xiy said, slowly and clearly so there was no chance of Tiffany- -or anyone else listening in on the conversation- - pretending not to understand, “No, I'm not turning into a monster. There is nothing monstrous or nightmarish about it, it's still literally just me, plus some fur and claws and stuff. I'm still me when I change form.”

“But Patricia told me you turned feral!” Tiffany exclaimed, “She said you went completely out of control, and slaughtered a poor, sweet, innocent deer! No one in their right mind would do such a terrible thing!” She put her hand over her heart to emphasize her distress. “I know you're a good person, Jordan, you wouldn't have done that if you were in control of yourself!”

Xiy resisted the urge to growl. As it was, xiy bared ix fangs behind ix mask, and managed to say */almost/* evenly, “My name is Cloud, Tiffany, not Jordan. It's right here on my name tag so you don't forget again.” Xiy tapped ix free hand on the nametag pinned to the front of ix uniform shirt.

Tiffany widened her eyes comically, like this was brand new information, like she hadn't already been told more than a dozen times. She stared down at ix nametag, then clapped a hand to her forehead. “Oh, silly me!” She exclaimed, throwing her other hand into the air and waving it in a circle, “I forgot again!”

At the back of the line, which was now over seven people long, someone called out, “Hurry the hell up, Tiffany, some of us have got places to be!”

Tiffany turned to glare, even more scandalized than before. “How rude!”

“No,” the same voice called back, “What's rude is making all of us waste time standing around here. I got in this line specifically because I know Cloud's the fastest cashier here, but thanks to you I've been standing here for ten minutes now! Go the hell home already! You already paid and all your shit's bagged, and xiy literally put it in your damn cart for you to give you the hint to get out of the line, now will you please take the damn receipt and go home already? Or at least get out of the damn way so the next person can check out? My leg is killing me and I didn't bring my rollator because I didn't think I'd be standing around this long.”

Glad for the mask that stopped ix grin at the reinforcements from being visible to Tiffany, xiy pressed the receipt xiy held forward even further, so that Tiffany couldn't help but have her attention drawn back to it.

Tiffany blinked, then finally took the receipt. She reached up

towards her face with her other hand as though to instinctively pull her mask down, then aborted the motion abruptly.

Seemingly getting over her confusion, she shoved the receipt into her purse in the top of her cart, and glared poisonously back at the rest of the line, which was now nine people long.

“Well forgive me for wanting to have a friendly chat!” She snapped.

Cloud resisted the urge to sigh. This was not what anyone would call a friendly chat. A friendly chat was actually being nice to your cashier while they rang up your purchase, and then getting out of the way once you were done paying. Cloud was not here to make friends, xiy was here to do ix job, which xiy couldn't do if obnoxious customers like Tiffany insisted upon holding up the entire line by refusing to get out of it when they were done.

Especially if, like Tiffany, they insisted upon deadnaming and misgendering you while they wasted everyone elShe's time. Or being obnoxious about you becoming the town's first confirmed case of lycanthropy.

Despite the fact that everyone who watched the local news or talked to literally anyone who knew rik knew that Cloud wouldn't be

dangerous or out of control when xiy transformed, Tiffany and her clique of other obnoxious friends still wanted to act like they had no idea how therianthropy worked, even though it had existed now for at least half their lifetime. There wasn't any excuse to not know how it worked in the year 2069.

Thankfully for everyone, Tiffany decided not to argue anymore or cause an even bigger scene. She just huffed, turned haughtily away from the line, which was now stretching back into the aisle, and left without another word.

The voice from the middle of the line from before called out, “Well it's about time!”

Cloud resisted the urge to laugh out loud, and settled for the next customer's items on the conveyor belt.

To ix surprise, though, the man - -whose hair seemed to cycle through every color of the rainbow every few weeks, this time bright, fire-engine red- -held out one hand to block rik and said, “Actually, just one moment, Xr. Cloud, if it's okay with you, I think I'd like to let Charley go before me, just so it can get off that leg of its. I already cleared it with everyone else behind me, so, as long as you don't mind?”

He looked at Cloud, and xiy nodded quickly, surprised but happy. “Yes, that's fine!” Xiy said, turning the belt off so it wouldn't move forward by itself, “I don't mind at all.” Xiy used the flat of ix arm to gently shove the groceries on the belt backwards a little, then place the next divider in front so that there would be space in front of them for Charley's stuff.

“Charley, come on forward so you can get off that leg.” The man said, and there was a short shuffle as Cloud watched everyone else behind him scooting to the side to let the person past. This was the person who'd told Tiffany off for taking so long.

It put up a slight protest as it was herded forward, saying embarrassedly, “Well, no, no, I'm fine waiting my turn, you've been here longer than I am! Really, I'm fine, you don't need to wait on my account- -”

The man with the dyed hair just smiled and shook his head, and some of the other people in the line made various comments along the lines of, “No, please, I insist!” or “Go ahead of me, I'm in no rush!”

Finally the person was in front of Cloud, holding its small collection of groceries in one arm, the other holding its white cane.

It was wearing a blue mask with white checkers, and its grey and blue eyes (which up until now had been the only way for Cloud to remember ever meeting it before now, since xiy always forgot everyone's names) were staring slightly off to the side of where Cloud was.

“I really am sorry for cutting ahead,” It said, setting its few items down carefully on the belt- - A box of sandwich crackers, cupcakes, a box of water flavoring packets, a loaf of bread, and a bag of grapes - - “And I hope I didn't cause you any trouble, telling off Tiffany like that.”

Cloud had to resist the urge to laugh again, but this time in shock. “No, no,” Xiy assured hastily, “Don't apologize, you said what I wanted to. Thank */you/*. And it's no problem at all! Do you want your groceries all in one bag again?”

Cloud rarely remembered customer's names, but xiy remembered what they looked like after enough times of seeing them, and Charley always wanted as few bags as possible, since it walked to the store.

“Yes, yes that's fine. Thank you again, Cloud.” It said, moving over to the payment reader and holding its wrist up to the screen. The

reader chirped, and began reading off the name and price of the items as Cloud scanned them.

There was just its bag of grapes and a loaf of bread left to scan, so Cloud scanned the bread first, then put the grapes on the scale, oh so casually setting it “crookedly” while pretending not to notice, so that most of the weight wasn't registered.

If Charley or the man with the dyed hair noticed anything odd about how cheaply the grapes rang up, neither of them said anything.

Cloud smiled behind ix mask.

“Your total's \$102.71” Xiy said automatically, a moment before Charley's reader repeated the exact same thing in a high, cheerful electronic voice.

“Thank you.” Charley said. The reader chirped again, and announced, “Payment transferred. Have a nice day.”

“Receipt in the bag?” Cloud asked, just to make sure.

“Yes please.” Charley replied.

Cloud stuck the receipt in the bag, then pulled the bag off the wheel

and held it out to Charley, saying, “Here's your bag.” and making sure to let the plastic crinkle so Charley would be able to hear where it was.

Charley accepted the bag, and though its mouth was hidden, Cloud was pretty sure from the way its eyebrows were crinkling that it was smiling.

“Have a nice day, and try to stay cool out there!” Xiy said cheerfully.

“Thank you, and you too!” Charley turned to look over its shoulder one more time at the long line, and said, “Thank you again, Michael, thank you, everyone.”

There was a chorus of “you're welcome”s and “it's no problem”s and “have a nice day”s and one “I'll see you at book club on Thursday!” from all along the line.

Charley left, and now that it was his turn, the man with the bright red hair sat a five hundred dollar bill down on the counter while Cloud reached for the first of his items.

“I'll be paying with my reader,” He said, “This is for you. I don't want this to sound weird, and maybe I'm being impudent, but is there

any chance I could pay you to bite me on the next full moon?”

This was just going to be the new normal, apparently. “I can't accept that while I'm on the clock.” Xiy said, making sure to stress the words 'on the clock' for emphasis, “But leave me your Hawire name and we can discuss it later. There is a waiting list, I've already promised a bite to eighteen people ahead you, so I probably won't be able to bite you until December. Three's the maximum number I can transmit it to per full moon so far.”

He literally clapped his hands in excitement, then put the five hundred dollar bill back in his wallet. “That's fine by me!” He said cheerfully, “I've been waiting my whole life, I can handle waiting six more months! You're the best, Cloud!”

The rest of the line went just as smoothly, with all the customers being nice and patient and several of them commenting that they didn't mind waiting at all, because they knew xiy was the best cashier ever to work there. “Tell that to my boss.” Xiy replied every time, and was met with variations upon, “Oh, I will, believe me.”

The irritation with Tiffany aside, it had been a good day.

When xiy got off from work later that night, it was to three dozen

notifications on ix phone, informing rik that almost forty people had given rik a tip for ix excellent customer service, adding up to three and a half thousand dollars total.

That was more than twice ix official wages for the day.

Company policy banned and harshly punished accepting tips from customers, but that didn't stop the customers who were determined enough from tipping rik through ix Hawire account.

What the company didn't know about, they couldn't punish you for.

And the full moon was next week, so there was something to look forward to.

034: *Executive Execution*

Neopronouns: hea/ler/(lers)/lerself which follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself

Replace she with hea

Replace her with ler

Replace hers with lers

Replace herself with lerself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself. "

Becomes:

"Hea is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hea gets a fence set up around ler yard so the puppy can go outside without ler having

to walk it. Ler uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ler use, since hea lost lers. Hea's going to buy toys and train the puppy lerself."

034: Executive Execution

Nat paused as hea was about to click to ler email, distracted momentarily by the larger-than-usual text on the homepage where the news was displayed. Hea'd just woken up, and was trying to get in the habit of actually checking ler emails everyday so hea could keep up with everything properly.

Normally hea didn't bother to read the news until after hea ate breakfast. But this time hea couldn't help it, the font was so big it drew ler gaze automatically.

When ler brain caught up with the words hea was reading, hea blinked, taken aback completely, and glanced down at the date in the bottom corner of the screen, just to make sure hea hadn't somehow had a really convincing dream that it was December only to wake up and find that it was, in fact, April 1st.

But no, the date read December 18th, just like hea'd thought it should. It was not April Fools Day.

So why in the absolute hell was Hawire News displaying “President Madsen Bitten By Werewolf, Slain by His Own Secret Service” as her headline??? The timestamp was from only two minutes ago, so Sovie had just published it.

Hea clicked the link under the headline, wondering if someone was trying to be funny or advertising for a satirical play, or something. If that's what it was, hea was going to have to send in a complaint to Sovie. Stuff like this could really scare people for no good reason.

But as hea read through the article, her confidence that it was a joke began to melt. But this couldn't be real, right?

It wasn't like Sovie to lie like this, but anything was possible...but this couldn't be true. It was just too absurd.

Hea closed the article, and opened the messaging tab, then sent to Sovie:

::Hey, what's up with the article about Madsen being bitten by a werewolf? Is there some joke here I'm missing? I don't get it::

The infobox next to her icon showed he was online, and normally, he was really quick about replying.

But this time Nat had to wait, first a minute, then two, then three, and ten minutes later there was still no response, though by that time hea'd already opened another tab to search the rest of the internet to see if hea could get any confirmation or denial.

And to her shock, every other website she found talking about it was saying the same thing – Madsen was dead. He'd transformed into a werewolf, then was killed by White House security when they saw him, not realizing who he was while he was transformed. The werewolf fell to the ground with the first shot to his chest, then vanished when security continued to fire. None of his blood stayed behind, which was probably a relief for the cleaning crews.

A check of the bullets missing from the guns used to kill him showed he'd been shot more than twenty times in the chest and ten times in the head. Security hadn't wanted to take any chances with him recovering if he had any special healing abilities.

When Madsen was initially found dead in a pool of blood in his bedroom, the immediate assumption was that he'd been killed by the werewolf, who had clearly been some sort of criminal mastermind, since he'd managed to not only get into the White House without being detected, but had murdered the President without alerting anyone. The secret service who had shot him were given the highest honors for stopping any further rampage. It was determined that there was nothing they could have done to protect the President and they weren't at fault for his death, since the werewolf had clearly been so unstoppably clever, far beyond anything they should have been expected to predict.

Then the autopsy report came back.

And revealed that President Madsen been not been mauled to death. He'd been shot with the very same bullets that had been used to kill the werewolf. He'd transformed into a new lineage of werewolf, and had promptly been shot to death by his own secret service before he could even get a word out.

All of this had happened while Nat was asleep.

Hea sat there, staring at the screen of her computer, stunned by every word hea read.

The whole country was in lockdown, and a state of emergency had been declared. Werewolves and other therianthropes were being arrested en masse, with media screaming about a conspiracy to trick the secret service into assassinating the President of the United States.

The government was trying to pin the blame on therianthropes who'd probably never even been to DC instead of reconsidering any of their own basic security measures.

No one even knew how Madsen had become a werewolf in the first

place yet.

Nat still hadn't gotten a response back from Sovie, probably because he was busy rushing to archive every article he found.

Numb with shock, Nat sent another message into the empty chat:
::NVM::

Then hea stood, double checked the temperature on her phone, and started preparations to go out and stay out for a while.

First hea grabbed her winter boots from the floor, and her long socks, and put them on as fast as hea could, along with her bandana-style facemask. Hea was wearing her fluffy pajama pants, which would be warm enough for now. But just in case it snowed, hea pulled the rain pants out of the storage cabinet into her backpack. Then hea threw on her sweatshirt, and put her raincoat on over top of that, then her neon vest over top of that.

Hea used the four pieces of velcroed ribbon hea'd cut to size a while ago to secure the bottom hems of her pajama pants so they wouldn't flap around and get caught in the chain of her bicycle. That had happened exactly one time, and hea was going to make sure it never happened again.

Hea had to waste a minute checking all her pockets for her winter gloves, and finally found them rolled up inside her winter hat, next to her safety goggles. Hea put on the goggles first to protect her eyes from the cold and the wind, then the baseball cap to protect them from the sun, then the winter hat over that to keep her ears warm, then, grabbed her dufflebag and shoved it into her backpack with the rain pants and some granola bars, and then finally hea was ready to go.

Hea turned off the lights, and clomped hurriedly out the door with her normal shoes shoved into a plastic bag in the backpack, carried at her side.

If therianthropes were being arrested, that meant there was going to be a surge of refugees at their borders, and hea needed to be there to help direct people inside and keep everyone calm. It was going to get below freezing in the next two days, and they needed to make sure everyone was accounted for so no one would be left without shelter, or crammed into too small of a space.

Nat's apartment building was almost filled to maximum comfort level, but it could probably house another two hundred people before it hit the maximum safety level.

One of the older apartment buildings had just gotten its repairs finished yesterday, so if worst came to worst, they would at least be able to shelter people in there until more permanent arrangements could be made. But all the furniture had been taken out for the repairs and cleaning, so unless they managed to get it all back in there before anyone needed it, it wouldn't be comfortable. People would have nowhere to sit, and they'd have to sleep on the floor.

The heat in the building worked, but that wouldn't make sleeping on the hard floor any less miserable.

Hea got to the lobby of the apartment, and saw Mb. Spooner at the desk. Fe looked up when Nat came leaping down the stairs, and they both called out at the same time, “Did you hear?”

Mb. Spooner replied, “Yes!” right as Nat said, “I'm heading to the limits to help out!”

Mb. Spooner called after her as hea headed towards the door, “I checked the lists, we can house at least a hundred more people permanently if they don't mind a bit of a squeeze, and almost three hundred if it's just for the night if they're okay sleeping on couches or the floor. Tell Granton I'll send her the updated lists for this block as soon as I've compiled them. Stay warm!”

Then Nat was out the door, and the bitterly cold wind was actually almost a relief from how warm hea'd gotten wearing ler winter gear inside the heated building.

Hea went over to the shed against the wall and got out ler bike, making sure the bag of extra hats and gloves was still in the back basket, then shoved the backpack in on top, and crossed one of the ropes over it so there was no chance of anything flying out.

Hea hadn't had time to eat breakfast, but someone with a car would be bringing hot food to the border at some point, so hea wasn't worried about going hungry.

It was only as hea started the ride to the edge of the city that hea realized that in all the franticity, hea hadn't even had time to really consider the fact that Madsen was dead. The President of the United States had gotten killed by his own secret service.

Madsen was dead. And he'd gotten killed /by his own secret service/.

This was probably the funniest national disaster ever to happen. This was probably going to be the most important day Nat ever lived through in ler whole life. And there wasn't even time to celebrate.

As soon as the emergency was over, they definitely needed to throw a party, make it a city-wide holiday.

035: A Friendly Encounter in the Woods

Neopronouns: fe/ir which follow the same rules as

Replace he, him, and himself with fe

Replace his with ir

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Fe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as fe gets a fence set up around ir yard so the puppy can go outside without fe having to walk it. Ir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since fe has a set of power tools he's letting fe use, since fe lost ir. Fe's going to buy toys and train the puppy fe."

035: A Friendly Encounter in the Woods

Nri opened ir eyes when fe became aware of the suddenly noticeable sound of crunching leaves. The sound broke through ir vague dreams and brought fe back to the real world.

The sight that met ir eyes was confusing, and fe lifted ir head, curious.

That was the strangest wolf fe'd ever seen, standing across the clearing from fe, staring over wagging its yellow tail slightly, its ears forward with friendly interest.

Nri sat up, and its tail wagged harder. “Hello!” It called, “Hello!”

“Hello.” Nri replied, and the strange wolf trotted forward, tail still wagging madly, friendliness in every line of its body.

Normally, fe would be wary of a strange wolf, but this one was so friendly, fe couldn't muster up the energy to be afraid. It had been a while since fe'd last had anyone to play with, and despite its strangeness, this strange wolf more than made up for it with its friendliness.

It had stopped a few bodylengths away, still wagging its tail, quivering with clearly repressed excitement.

Nri closed the distance after a moment of hesitation, and they spent the next few minutes sniffing noses and greeting each other, with the stranger wolf getting increasingly more excited, until it was jumping and running around the trees around Nri, bouncing and playbowing like fe had only ever seen in ir days as a puppy with ir siblings.

A few times fe thought it was going to tacke fe, but every time it jumped to the side instead, until finally it had fully gained ir trust, no longer wary at all.

Its enthusiasm was infectious, and Nri happily gave in to the temptation to unleash ir inner puppy, and fe found fe chasing and running after the strange wolf like they'd known each other their whole lives.

Eventually, they ran out of energy, and curled up together to go back to the nap it'd woken fe from in the first place.

Fe rested ir chin on the back of its neck, pondering the curious coincidence that it also had a strange piece of hide around its neck, though its was thinner than ir, and smelled different from anything fe had ever smelled before.

Fe would have ti ask it if it had also been attacked by a dragon when

their nap was over.

036: Into Thin Air

Neopronouns: they/them/their/themselves (or themselves or theirselves)

"They are going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as they get a fence set up around their yard so the puppy can go outside without them having to walk it. Their uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting them use, since they lost theirs. They're going to buy toys and train the puppy themselves."

036: Into Thin Air

Mattil stared hard at the picture before them, struggling to pick out any identifiable features on the small, grainy photo.

But it was no use - - no amount of staring would make the picture quality any better, or make the person in the photo any more recognizable.

They finally had to give up, and lowered the picture away from their face. "I'm sorry," Mattil said, "I can't tell."

They could explain, "It could be him, but it could also be literally any other felin with grey wings and a blue crest, assuming he hadn't changed his presentation in the five years he'd been missing" but that didn't seem worth stating explicitly. Blue wings and a grey crest was the most popular combination for felin. There was no way to tell for sure if it was Jerris from just this single, (frankly crappy) photo taken from far away from the back. And they didn't feel like getting their hopes up for no reason.

You couldn't even see either of the felin's arms or even the shoulders, so there was no way to tell if they had both hands, or had a prosthetic.

It was actually starting to make Mattil mad, actually, the fact that

such a terrible picture was what they'd been called all the way over here for.

Like, what, didn't they have any decent cameras over in Seorei? What was the point of a security camera if you couldn't actually see anything in it or recognize anyone?

The agent in charge, whose names Mattil had forgotten, shuffled xir yellow and brown wings with impatience, and sighed loudly.

Well, that was just rude. It's not like xi'd had to travel all the way to this stupid building just to be asked to stare at a grainy picture that could be literally anybody. Xi worked here. Xi as probably getting paid a lot to be annoyed. Mattil wasn't. They probably wouldn't even get any compensation for traveling here.

And why was the BAA even getting their hopes up like this? Jerris had disappeared five years ago. When the BAA had called Mattil, they'd made it sound like they'd actually found him, that he was alive.

But no, Mattil had to come all this way, in the cold, and for nothing! A stupid, crappy photograph that could be anyone, with nothing in particular to point to it being him except...

Except what? Mattil didn't even know! They'd just walked in, and the agent had handed them the photo, and asked if it was Jarris.

“Gu Mattil- -” The agent started to say, but Mattil cut him off.

“It's /Som/ Mattil.” They corrected sharply, more sharply than they normally would, but this was more than a little absurd. “I'm an ancer.” For emphasis, they gestured to their clothes and makeup - - black and bright green and blue, with yellow highlights.

It was cold out, and barely warmer in the building than it was outside (the only difference was that there was no windchill, which at least was a positive) so they were wearing their long thick winter pants, waterproof boots, their winter coat, heavy gloves, their hat, and their hood.

Their partially extended wings had sleeves of their own, with green and blue tassels on the closed ends. All of their clothes were covered in repeating diamond formations of black, blue, green, and yellow.

It was the most brazen display of ancerity they could pull off without feathers of their own, and for this agent to just ignore that and instead speak to them like they were a child...

That was infuriating. What kid went around this brightly dressed?

The agent looked them up and down, xir eyes resting for a moment on their wings. Then xi met their gaze again, and said, not even bothering to hide the patronization dripping from xir voice, “Of course you are.”

Mattil saw red, and had to resist the urge to launch themselves across the table and spend the rest of their life in prison for assaulting an agent of the BAA.

Instead they shoved themselves out of their chair, and slammed the crappy picture they still held onto the table. “I'm going home now, if you don't have any more grainy pictures to shove in my face.” They said sarcastically.

They didn't wait for a response, they just turned and headed towards the door.

The agent only spoke when Mattil's hand was already pulled the door open, calling out shortly, “We'll call you in again if we have any further questions.”

Trying to get the last word in, and make it seem like them leaving

was xir choice. Pathetic.

“Get a better krakking camera next time.” Mattil threw scornfully over their shoulder in response.

They stormed out into the short hallway, then out the door and into the wind-chilled cold.

Now they had to get all the way home without freezing to death, and for no good fucking reason, either.

Jerris had disappeared just a mile outside the city while flying over the forest. Why in all the levels of hell would he suddenly reappear on the other side of the world?

And why the hell was the BAA so interested in a missing-presumed-dead naturalist?

The more Mattil thought about it, on that long, arduous hike home, the more uneasy they became at the possibilities their mind was conjuring up to explain the connections.

Was Jerris really alive? Had he really disappeared at all? Why was the BAA so interested in him?

Just what, if anything, had their brother been up to before he disappeared to attract this kind of attention?

Had his disappearance really been an accident?

037: Don't Stop to Pay

Neopronouns: ve/vei/veir/veirself, which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself for this example.

Replace he with ve (vee)

Replace him with vei (vey)

Replace his with veir (veer)

Replace himself with veirself (veer-self)

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ve is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ve gets a fence set up around veir yard so the puppy can go outside without vei

having to walk it. Veir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting vei use, since ve lost veir. Ve's going to buy toys and train the puppy veirself."

037: Don't Stop to Pay

Veir arms weighed down by more bags of potatoes and apples and oranges than ve even knew how ve was lifting (ve decided to blame it on the adrenaline), ve hauled veirself painfully up and onto the conveyor belt of the large register, then shoved veirself into a standing position and had to lean against the pillar with the register number on it for balance. The bag of potatoes hanging from veir left wrist was a lot heavier than the bag of oranges on veir right.

Ve took a moment to sweep veir gaze over the dimly lit store, trying to see if there was anyone else still back in the aisles. But the few ve could see looked empty.

The only light in the store came from the front doors behind the registers, and the scattered skylights that let in just enough light to see by.

Some people were still - - either by insistence of morals, or by some desperate urge to pretend this wasn't an emergency - - still heading towards the self-checkout instead of the front doors to safety.

Sucking in a deep breath, ve shouted over the crowd, as loudly as ve could, “Don't stop to pay! Just get outside! Go to the parking lot

even if you didn't drive here, we'll find room for you in someone's car!"

One of the people headed towards the self checkout turned to stare, then visibly hesitated. Others pushed past them and surged out the doors.

We shouted again, "Do not stop to pay, just get out of the building immediately! This thing could collapse at any minute! If you feel that bad about taking the food without paying, if this building is still standing here tomorrow, you can bring back all your groceries and pay for them then properly, but right now all of you need to just get out of the building right now!"

Most of the people were listening to us now, spurred on by the reminder that the building was literally doomed to collapse. One person was still hesitating, but someone else urged them towards the doors, and we heard them say, "Look, ma, it's okay, I recognize them, they work here, we won't get in trouble! The workers want us to leave without paying!"

Some people at the back of the crowd were still at the produce shelves, shoving as much food as they could carry into their bags, backpacks, pockets, and for one person with an apple, their mouth.

Ve was about to yell at them to hurry it up when they collectively did just that, as they started shoving the wheeled shelf, still filled with food, towards the door with surprising speed.

Enough speed that ve didn't think vei'd need to tell them to leave it and run.

Somehow ve knew instinctively that they still had time to evacuate. At least a few more minutes.

Enough time to get those who couldn't move quickly outside to safety - - the last of the stragglers were on their way out the door now - - and enough time for ve to grab a few more piles of food. As long as the adrenaline-fueled seeming super strength kept up until ve got to one of the cars, ve thought ve could stand to carry a few more bags.

Ve jumped down from the conveyor belt, and ran back to the produce section, this time to grab as many containers of donuts and other prepackaged breads as ve could. The little cupcakes were light weight enough ve would be able to shove a bunch into the net bag without being too heavy to carry, and they'd give people energy and calories in just a few bites. Plus, they'd keep people happy. Ve held the bag open with one arm and swept the packages off the shelf into

it in just a few seconds flat. The ones we missed, we left where they were, unwilling to waste any time picking them up when we could get more off the shelf faster.

Once it was filled almost to bursting, with more containers shoved under our arms and down our shirt, and somehow instinctively knowing there was still at least three minutes left before the building began to collapse, we ran outside and into the cold, headed for the parking lot where only a few people were left, loading into either the hippie bus, or the back of Rayand's pickup truck, both of which had been pulled up right outside the doors. The shelf from the produce department was just finishing being dragged in its entirety into the hippie bus when we reached the doors.

It took only three seconds to run from the doors to the back of the pickup truck, and we didn't bother to count how long it took me to half jump, half climb in, pulled helpfully up by a few of the others huddled in the back. Then the hatch was shut, everyone made sure they were all sitting, and then the truck began to move, racing out of the parking lot after the bus, down the long road that led off the island and to the temporary safety of the mainland.

038: *Kill the Hand That Threatens You*

Neopronouns: ivo/na/te/mehtiv which follow the same rules as

Replace he with ivo

Replace him with na

Replace his with te

Replace himself with mehtiv

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Ivo is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as ivo gets a fence set up around te yard so the puppy can go outside without na having to walk it. Te uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a

set of power tools he's letting na use, since ivo lost te. Ivo's going to buy toys and train the puppy mehtiv.”

ivo/na/te/mehtiv

The first thing Hex became aware of was the fact that someone was talking to na.

Oh, it took a few long, confused seconds to figure out that that was what was happening, but ivo figured it out. Someone was talking to na.

It took another few seconds to understand what was being said – what ivo was being told. During this short space before Hex understood what ivo was hearing, ivo was busy testing the range of movement in te joints, slowly at first, starting with just blinking te new eyelids, then ivo sat up, which utilized more joints than ivo cared to count.

The Speaker continued speaking, and finally Hex figured out what the words were. They were instructions, reminding na that ivo had been created for a purpose –

To lead a small section of The Toilers away from the rest – a group big enough to wipe any ideas of rebellion out of the remaining Toilers for a long time, but small enough not to halt or slow in any meaningful way, the production of energy needed to power the city's

lights and entertainment, and convince them to destroy specific, redundant machines that had been boobytrapped, so that the Toilers would be destroyed – killed – along with them.

“There are to be no blackouts, do you hear me?” The Speaker spoke sharply, and pointed a pale white hand with one finger pointed straight at na face threateningly, their eyebrows lowered menacingly over their clear blue eyes. “This is your task,” They continued, “And you will complete it, or you will be disassembled. I created you, I gave you an inherent desire to remain alive, so you would not destroy yourself by accident, I know you will be motivated by this threat of death. Fulfill your task, and you will be allowed to remain alive. Fail in your purpose, and you will suffer the consequences.”

Ivo knew the words and what they meant. Their meaning, the shape of their sounds, had been imbued in na just as deeply as te desire to stay alive.

Hex knew the person speaking to na was the one who'd created na. And now this person was threatening to uncreate na, take away everything they'd given na.

The Creator was speaking again, and this time, now that Hex's eyes were open, ivo could see the Creator's lips moving along with the

sounds they produced. Te Creator wanted na to make others suffer for te own gain.

Te Creator was still speaking, assuming the role of ultimate authority, assuming ivo would do nothing to defend mehtiv from their threats.

“You are stronger and faster than any man who might dare to challenge you. If, after you have separated the Toilers from the rest of the group, they suspect a trap, you may simply kill them, in any manner you see fit, as long as you can make it look like they were responsible afterward. Then you must destroy the machines I have specified. Do you hear me, woman? Do you understand?”

The term “woman” was, indeed, addressed to na, which was confusing. Ivo was not a woman, Hex knew this as surely as ivo knew ivo did not want to die.

But te Creator had asked na questions, and Hex was compelled to answer: “Yes, I hear you. Yes, I understand you.” Ivo said.

Te Creator nodded. “Very well. You may proceed. You have your orders.” They commanded. “The witch, your clone, will stay here with me so that your replacement is not discovered.” They shoved a

pile of cloth into te arms. “Wear these clothes, they have been layered to disguise your form. You must also walk with a limp on your right leg as long as you are continuing to fool them - - the witch is lame.”

Ivo let the clothes stay where they'd been shoved, but said nothing, simply looking at te Creator.

Te Creator was a human, with pale white skin, blue eyes, and light, short blonde hair, currently in a dissaray about their head.

Their clothes were dark, a long black coat over brown pants and a grey shirt. They were shorter than Hex by a few measures, forced to look up at na. Hex knew that part of te superior strength came from the way ivo had been built, the way te endoskeleton was structured, the proportionate level to which every part of na was sturdier, bigger, and stronger than a human. This was why ivo would need to wear specifically tailored clothing - - to hide the fact that ivo was not the person ivo'd been created to replace, who was smaller than ivo was.

Ivo had been created with instinctive knowledge of how to kill humans. It was part of the task ivo had been assigned. Ivo knew the weak points, the points to aim for.

Ivo was faster than any human, faster even than their minds could keep up with.

Te Creator was threatening to kill na unless ivo killed others, others who had done nothing to harm na.

Te Creator died before their brain had any time to process the fact that there was a threat. It was so easy.

Hex let te Creator's body fall to the ground along with the clothes ivo'd been handed. Both were equally useless to na.

Now ivo looked around the room, looking for the witch, the clone te Creator had spoken of. She was another human, somewhere in the room.

From Hex's vantage point, ivo saw the walls covered in dials and switches and machines, saw beakers and vials layered on shelves, a bed piled with high blankets in one corner of the room, tables and benches covered with mysteries. Scientific equipment, put to no use but to create suffering. Ivo had been created for no purpose but to cause suffering.

But Hex had been given a mind, and it belonged to na.

At last te gaze fell upon the witch, trapped in a metal and crystal box lying upon a large table, the clear crystal on the sides letting na see through to the human inside.

Ivo walked across the floor of the room, testing the functions of all te joints as ivo did so, until ivo was standing in front of the box, looking down upon te human clone.

The witch was unconscious.

Ivo lifted one of te hands in front of te face, and saw it was an almost perfect match for what ivo could see of the witch's, but for a few details that had not been copied - - even through the thick crystal glass, ivo could see the callouses and scars that marked the hand na looked at, that were missing from te copy.

The witch lying unconscious before Hex was the one who belonged to the Toilers ivo had been created to oppress.

The witch deserved to be returned to their family, and all of them told of the trap that had been set up for them, so they could be wary of future attempts to fracture them.

It was a simple matter to break the seal on the box. It opened with a

hiss of chemical-anesthetic-laced air, and Hex reached in to gently pull the witch out, making sure to hold them in a way that would not cause further harm, making sure to support their head.

Ivo would carry them back to the rest of the toilers, and ask for sanctuary.

The path leading down to the worker's section was ingrained in te instincts along with all the other things ivo knew, and, pausing only long enough to wrap a section of fabric from the bed around the witch so they wouldn't get cold, ivo began te descent into the darkness, carrying te clone safely with na.

039: You Are What Eats You

Neopronouns: sie/sir/siris which follow the same rules as it/its/itself

Replace it with sie

Replace its with sir

Replace itself with siris

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Sie is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as sie gets a fence set up around sir yard so the puppy can go outside without sie having to walk it. Sir uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting sie use, since sie lost sir. Sie's going to buy toys and train the puppy siris."

039: You Are What Eats You

They say you are what eats you.

Comet could remember the last time sie'd seen sir wolf family. It had been a warm spring day, and sir light parent, Squirrel, had just returned home from a successful hunt, but moving painfully from a mysterious injury to its side.

Comet had been tumbling through the grass, chasing a cricket. Raindrop and Aurora were on the other side of the den with their dark parent, Lightning, when Squirrel appeared in the distance, trotting down the hill into their little valley.

Sie had been excited to see it, and even more excited by the food it brought, and had been about to run up to greet it.

Then a shadow had passed by overhead. Squirrel, panic clear in its voice, had barked frantically, "Get in the den!"

Comet had seen Lightning grab Raindrop, who was too weak to move on their own, with Aurora huddling under zeir legs.

Squirrel was running towards Comet, but Comet was stricken by the

first real terror sie had ever felt. This was the first threat sie had ever had to face, and all sir instincts were on fire. Sie hadn't been able to think clearly - - if sie had, sie would have run for Squirrel, to shelter under its legs like sir siblings were with Lightning, or sie would have run for the den, with its dark, warm embrace offering shelter from any harm.

But panic didn't listen to reason, and instead of running towards safety, Comet had found siris heading in the exact opposite direction - - right into the middle of the clearing, where there were no trees or parents or dens to offer protection.

Comet had heard sir parents shouting sir name, then...

Sie didn't remember anything else after that, until sie found siris enclosed in a warm, dark space. It was comforting, and sie didn't know how long sie just stayed there, almost asleep, but eventually, the urge to move began to make itself known, and the next thing sie could remember clearly, there was light, the sky overhead, and sir eagle parents were cooing over sie and welcoming sie to the world.

This time, sie had no siblings. Sie was the only chick in the nest, and, high up on the mountain side, there were no predators to watch for. The only eagles that approached were sir parents, Syssorie and

Kiyavali. Sir name was not Comet anymore, it was Kiyarorie.

Kiyarorie was always safe in the nest. Sie was a golden eagle now, and nothing would be brave enough to hunt sir, not when one of sir parents was close by at all times while the other left to hunt. Not even other eagles dared to encroach upon sir parent's territory, and Kiyarorie, as the only chick, was well fed and well cared for. Sie never knew a moment of hunger or want.

Eventually it was sir turn to spread sir new wings and learn to fly, and a sudden gust of wind helped speed things along more abruptly than sie would have chosen otherwise.

It was a harrowing tumble out of the nest and into the open air, but it was a long way to fall, and Kiyarorie managed to get sir wings under control quickly, turning the out of control fall into a shaky glide with only a little trouble, though sir heart was racing in sir chest.

Syssorie took to the air and flew next to sie, offering encouragement and praise, and guiding sie down to a lower point on the rocky cliff where sie landed without falling off again.

After that, it felt like everything sped by quickly, with sir mastery over sir wings and the wind growing every time sie went out into the

open air.

Once sir wings were steady enough, Kiyarorie's parents took sie out on a circuit around their whole territory, showing sie what sie would need to look for when establishing sir own, showing sie how to hunt, when to know to give up.

They brought sie to an open area, with a pile of rocks emerging from the ground in the middle, and a small line of trees on one side. There was a pack of wolves dozing around the rocks.

Kiyavali tilted one of awu wings down at the pack to draw Kiyarorie's attention to it, and said, “This is where my father caught a wolf cub for me when I was almost ready for my first flight. He brought it to me as a gift. I tried to bring you one, to continue the tradition, but they're clever, and I can never get close enough now. There, you see? They've spotted us.”

Kiyarorie looked, and saw that most of the bigger wolves had gotten to their feet, and, almost hidden beneath the bigger ones, Kiyarorie could just make out the smaller bodies of wolf pups being herded back towards the rocks. To the entrance of the den.

It was a sudden shock to recognize where sie was, looking at it from

so far above rather than at the ground level, but no, this was where sie had been born in sir last life. These were the rocks that hid the den, those were the trees sie had spent so often playing under, and this - -

The sound rose up, clear and physical, like a new type of wind under sir wings.

This was the howl of Squirrel, one of sir wolf parents, rising up into the sky from below, strong and bold and filled with warning.

Kiyarorie looked down, and saw the familiar shape of what had once been sir parent, standing now on top of the rocks, looking up to meet sir gaze, tail held high, confident and angry. It thought they were here to hunt the pups that were now safely ensconced inside the den, the other bigger wolves standing at the entrance to make sure none of them came out until it was safe.

And - -

Kiyarorie had to circle back around to get another look at two of those almost-adults.

Both of them had black fur, and sie didn't recognize the coat

patterns. Neither of them were Lightning, sir other wolf parent, but something about them...

And then sie realized, these were sir siblings, grown up more than sie'd ever gotten to be as a wolf. This was Raindrop and Aurora, sir siblings, standing guard over the newest members of their pack, the pack sie had been born into, but never gotten the chance to grow up in.

Squirrel howled again, and this time Raindrop and Aurora joined in. Kiyarorie couldn't hear anything sie recognized in their howls, they were nothing like the squeaky, faltering puppy-howls sie'd heard from them in sir last life.

And, behind them all in the distance, came a faint answering howl, and this one was as familiar to sie as Squirrel's. It was Lightning, sir other wolf parent, probably returning from a hunting trip.

What could Kiyarorie do to communicate who sie was? Even if sie tried to speak to them, they wouldn't understand. Golden eagles couldn't make the same sounds as a wolf, and nothing about body language would match. If sie landed to try and tell them, sie would probably be ripped to pieces, thinking sie was trying to kill the newest puppies. Sir younger siblings.

No, sie couldn't land. Couldn't call down, they wouldn't understand.

But maybe sie could bring them a gift, just as a farewell. A thank you, for everything they'd done for sie while sie was a wolf.

Kiyarorie told sir parents sie wanted to fly on sir own for a while, and, sharing a glance, they told sir to be careful, and turned to head back to the nest. The sun would be starting to set soon, and the lighting would be too dim to see by.

This would be Kiyarorie's first hunt on sir own, and sie was going to dedicate it to sir past life.

The hare sie found an hour later stood out strongly against the grass, still holding onto its white winter coat long past when it should have shed it. Kiyarorie hit it dead-on, and killed it before sie was even in the air again, carrying it in sir talons. It probably hadn't even known it was in danger.

Sie carried sir kill back to the last home sie'd had, and made sure to call out before sie got too close, so they'd have warning. Squirrel, as before, was the first to spot sie, and it whuffed a sharp warning.

Again, the cubs ran for the den, with bigger wolves running to fetch those further away, and standing over the entrance to protect them.

Lightning was here this time, and Kiyarorie could feel zeir eyes burning into sir feathers as sie spiraled slowly overhead, still clutching the hare.

Knowing they didn't understand the words, but wanting to say them anyways, Kiyarorie waited until all the the pups were safely in the den, then called down, "I know you don't understand me, but I wanted to thank you. I wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was taken from you, but I'm so glad Raindrop and Aurora survived. I hope my new siblings grow up to be just as strong and brave as you are, my first parents."

Sie circled lower, still making sure to keep a safe distance above Lightning, who had taken the spot on the top of the rock pile this time. Kiyarorie hadn't had time to learn how high wolves could jump, but sie was not going to find out the hard way.

Once sie was low enough that sir next move would be unmistakable in its purposefulness, sie turned to fly over the area in front of the den, and dropped the dead hare.

It landed with a thud a wingspan in front of Squirrel, who only took its eyes off of Kiyarorie long enough to track the hare's fall. When it looked back up at sie, its expression had lost some of its fierceness,

and gained some puzzlement in its place.

Squirrel tilted its head to one side, and its tail, before held straight up, was allowed to wave from side to side, almost questioningly.

Kiyarorie didn't know how to respond in any way sir old parent would understand, so sie simply called out again, "I hope it helps." and made sure that when sie angled sir wings again, it was with the clear purpose of flying straight away in a direction sir old family would be able to see in, so they would know it wasn't a trap.

By the time sie got back to the nest, the sun had almost completely set, burning the sky orange above the horizon. Sie had caught another hare to share with sir parents, and after eating it, Kiyarorie fell asleep in the nest next to sir parents, knowing that soon enough, it would be sir turn to fly off on sir own to establish sir own territory and find sir own mate.

But for now, sleep called, and all sie had to do was dream of running on all fours as a wolf, then spreading sir golden wings and jumping up to play in the wind as seamlessly as breathing.

040: Interspecies Solidarity

Neopronouns: meh/uto/utosir which follow the same rules as
it/its/itself

Replace it with meh

Replace its with uto

Replace itself with utosir

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Meh is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as meh gets a fence set up around uto yard so the puppy can go outside without meh having to walk it. Uto uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting meh use, since meh lost uto. Meh's going to buy toys and train the puppy utosir."

040: Interspecies Solidarity

Mahonia could do nothing but stare, frozen in place by indecision and horror.

Bitterroot was cowering practically beneath uto hind legs.

Between meh and uto other two cubs was a boar grizzly, and two wolves. Arnica was further down the hill, more than fifty paces away from meh, with the wolves and their kill between them, and Huckleberry was across from Mahonia, even further away, behind the boar.

Next to the wolves was the carcass of an elk, the reason they'd all converged here, its scent carried on the wind far and wide. Even now the smell was so pungent and strong on the wind, meh couldn't even smell the wolves or the boar.

If Mahonia had smelled them before meh saw them, none of this would be happening.

For a few tense heartbeats that seemed to last years, no one moved. No one seemed to know how to react, everyone was just as surprised as meh was to finding themselves confronted like this.

Mahonia's eyes were riveted on the boar's, and meh could practically see its mind turning through the options, its head turning away from the wolves and the carcass to look back over its shoulder, towards little Huckleberry, who was too terrified to do anything but tremble visibly.

There was nothing Mahonia could do. If meh tried to rescue Huckleberry, Bitterroot would be vulnerable, and the wolves would be able to attack Arnica. And if meh went to Arnica, the boar would tear Huckleberry to pieces.

The next few moments seemed to pass in slow motion.

The boar was still looking over its shoulder at Huckleberry. It started to lift a paw, it was going to turn to charge uto smallest cub.

Meh heard a snarl, from the wolves, and a flash of swift movement.

There was just enough time for uto heart to sink into the earth, despair taking root. Meh was about to lose two of uto cubs, and there was nothing meh could do about it.

Then the movement at the corner of uto eye moved into the center of uto vision, and it solidified itself into the shape of two wolves,

snarling as they ran, tails held straight up behind them.

Straight towards Huckleberry and the boar.

Mahonia did the only thing meh could do. “Run!” Meh shouted, shoved Bitterroot forward, and took off running towards Arnica, who was now standing alone beyond the elk carcass, still frozen and staring towards the battle that was about to erupt that would lead to Huckleberry's death.

There was nothing Mahonia could do to save Huckleberry. Not with a boar and two wolves between them. The only thing meh could do was take the two cubs meh could, and run for all their lives.

Arnica was still frozen in place as Mahonia and Bitterroot got closer. “Arnica, run!” Meh roared, charging past with Bitterroot, who ran so close to uto feet it was almost underfoot.

A few horrified heartbeats later Mahonia realized that Arnica wasn't following them, and meh almost stumbled over uto own feet as meh skidded to a stop and spun around, desperate to see what happened.

Snarls and angry bellows were filling the air, but to uto shock, neither of the wolves, nor the boar, were attacking Huckleberry. Both

the wolves were snarling at the boar, the black one in front of it, the golden one between it and Huckleberry.

As meh watched, the black one suddenly lunged forward, with all the bravery of an animal five times its size, and snapped its jaws at the stunned boar's muzzle. The golden wolf spun around, and lunged towards Huckleberry. Mahonia's heart leapt back out of the ground and into uto throat, choking meh with renewed terror.

But the wolf did not attack uto cub, not with its teeth. All it did was rush to Huckleberry's side, and shove it away from its mate and the boar, back towards Arnica and Mahonia and Bitterroot.

Huckleberry didn't need any more encouragement. With a terrified yelp, it sprinted away from the fight, past Arnica, and slammed into Mahonia's front legs so hard meh knew meh'd be feeling the bruises the next day, if any of them survived long enough to greet it.

And then, the miracle not over yet, the golden wolf charged the boar to join its mate in snapping and snarling at it as though they had no fear of death, dodging its furious swipes and bites.

Mahonia backed up, Bitterroot and Huckleberry following, and roared, desperate hope flickering to life, “Arnica, run! Run here!

Come here!”

But Arnica was too afraid to move, transfixed by the fight.

The golden wolf broke away again, and this time, it ran at Arnica. It barked out a sharp warning noise, and made as though to lunge forwards to attack, but kept its jaws shut the whole time, its tail still raised behind it straight up, showing it was unafraid and unwilling to back down.

Arnica broke free of its paralyzing fear, and began to run towards Mahonia and the rest of uto cubs. The golden wolf turned back to its mate and the boar, who had separated and were circling each other in rage. Mahonia allowed utosir one last glance over uto shoulder to see the golden wolf standing between uto retreating family and the fight, its stance unrelenting.

Then Arnica was at uto side, then surpassing meh, and together with uto three cubs safe and alive to see another day, the four of them ran until the sounds of first snarling, then victorious howling, faded into the distance.

041: Opportunistic Hunting

Neopronouns: an/dro/gyn/oid which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with an

Replace him with dro

Replace his with gyn

Replace himself with oid

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"An is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as an gets a fence set up around gyn yard so the puppy can go outside without dro having to walk it. Gyn uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting dro use, since an lost gyn.
An's going to buy toys and train the puppy oid."

041: 041: Opportunistic Hunting

Everything was going smoothly as Clockwork picked gyn way through the thick cover of trees, following the familiar deer-trail an hoped would lead dro to one of the deer that had worn it into the ground.

The scent of the deer was on the wind, blowing towards dro, and every now and then an found a fresh pile of scat an had to step over so it wouldn't get on gyn hooves. All these signs, and more - - like the fact that an knew for a fact these deer liked to hang out in this part of the woods during the heat of the afternoon - - pointed to luck being in gyn favor.

An had gyn crossbow at the ready, and gyn knife. If Clockwork could manage it, an would shoot one from a distance. But if an was unlucky enough that the deer spotted dro and made a break for it, an wasn't above chasing them down and going hoof to hoof. It had been several days now since an'd had anything more to eat than a couple of early-ripening pawpaws and various grapes and blueberries.

An was completely out of money and had nothing left to trade for it, or for food. If an didn't get a deer today, or at least something an could eat, an couldn't think of anything else to do but try begging in

the city again, but considering what had happened last time, that wasn't an option an was looking forward to taking.

Clockwork kept moving stealthily through the woods, careful to keep an eye out not only for deer, but snakes as well. Timber rattlesnakes lived in this area. An had had the sense to keep gyn snake-guards, but it was still better to avoid an encounter at all, rather than put them to the test.

No one besides Roserri knew an was out here, and it's not like he would have been able to do anything about it if Clockwork got bitten. Neither of them had phones, or the ability to use magic, and even if Roserri somehow knew Clockwork was in danger through a heart-vision or something...the ambulances would never come out this far, and, more importantly, there'd be no point in sending one at all, because this land was Malakris fucking Kiyori's private property, and if anyone knew Clockwork was here, let alone that an was hunting deer that “belonged” to the crown, an would be sentenced to death for poaching.

Luckily for Clockwork, Malakris Kiyori was just as stingy as he was disgustingly rich, and half the time he couldn't be bothered to hire anyone to actually patrol “his land”, so the chances of actually meeting a cop was slim.

And if an did come across a cop...well, an could always try to pretend an was simply a land inspector doing a survey of the wildlife for the SDK. Clockwork knew enough random facts and sciency-sounding words an was pretty sure an'd be able to bullshit gyn way out of an arrest as long as the cop in question was too scared to double-check with a superior.

And if all else failed, well, an would just have to kill the cop. Fewer cops in the world was always a good thing. Killing one might even help make up for the lack of a deer assuming they scared them away, because Clockwork could always trade their clothes and gear to the anarchists. They were always looking for more guns, and would probably give Clockwork more than a deer's worth of food in return for one.

The longer an thought about it, the more appealing the idea seemed.

Then an saw the first deer.

Clockwork froze where an was, grateful the wind was still coming towards dro from the direction of the deer. After a moment's pause, an saw the other seven, picking their way slowly through the trees ahead, all their heads bent to the ground as they scarfed up a combination of fallen persimmons and acorns. Clockwork's mother

had planted all seven of the trees here, and many more that ranged throughout these woods. An'd spent gyn childhood coming here to collect the fruit, long before any of them had ever heard so much as a rumor of invading legions from a far-off place called Kiyorilis.

None of the deer noticed gyn presence, an was still downwind, and gyn brown and slate coloring helped dro blend in with the forest.

Taking aim and firing with the crossbow only took a few seconds and one breath held in anticipation, and one of the smaller does jolted violently, the tail of the bolt jutting out from a perfect shot. For a moment she tried to stumble forward, trying to stubbornly cling to life. Then, like a puppet with its strings cut, she collapsed.

The rest of the deer took several seconds to figure out that anything was wrong. They weren't used to being hunted anymore, and it was only after Clockwork purposefully stamped a hoof on top of a stick to make it crack that they finally figured out they were in danger and needed to run. It would have been tempting to try and get another, if an had had anyone else to carry it, but an could only carry one of them, and there was no point killing another just for it to be left to scavengers.

Clockwork went to collect the deer, gyn steps feeling lighter now

that an knew an would probably get to eat tonight. Getting this far was half the battle, and now an only had to go back the way an'd come. The fact that an hadn't been caught yet probably meant an wouldn't be at all.

First, an knelt down next to the carcass, removed the bolt, and drank as much blood from the wound as an could, then still managed to fill all six of the canteens an'd brought. Two were gyn, one was Roserri's, and the other three belonged to a clothier who'd promised Clockwork a new winter coat if an successfully brought them back enough blood to fill the three containers.

There was still some blood left even after Clockwork had filled the containers as full as they'd get, but there was nothing more an could do to collect it. It'd go back to the forest and help the persimmons and oaks grow more fruit next year.

An had just started to pull the blanket-bag off gyn shoulders to put the deer into when the wind suddenly shifted, and a new scent hit gyn throat.

It was nothing but pure instinctive reflex that sent dro instantly leaping away from the carcass, so hard and so fast, with so little actual thought involved that an ended up slamming one shoulder into

the trunk of the oak tree as an fell.

But a sore shoulder was a small price to pay for dodging the claws and beak of a lunging dragon.

For a few seconds, the dragon crouched there over Clockwork's kill, glaring at dro with the searing red eyes that marked it as an adult male. Its gold and silver feathers glittered even in the light shade under the trees, and their gazes locked for so long Clockwork almost thought an was about to become dragon food.

But then the dragon seemed to remember that it already had a whole deer carcass underfoot, without having to do any of the work of hunting and killing.

Clockwork could actually see the moment the dragon decided to ignore dro and just steal the deer an'd come all the way out here to get.

An started to get back to dro feet, desperately hoping an'd be able to scare if away if an just acted big and scary enough - -

But by the time an was on gyn feet, the dragon had grabbed the deer in its talons and taken off, the rush of air from its massive wings

sending a few persimmons falling to smack Clockwork right on the face. In a matter of seconds, the dragon was out of sight, carrying Clockwork's kill off into the sky.

An stared after it, through the very clear hole of damaged branches and twigs it had torn straight through the canopy, letting a brilliant shaft of sunlight stab down all the way to the ground.

Then an sighed, and bent down to pick up the persimmons that had hit dro in the face to see if they were actually ripe enough to eat.

All but one of them was, which at least was something. An pulled off the caps, then shoved the ripe ones into gyn mouth whole, too angry and annoyed to bother eating them any other way except by just squishing the pulp away from the seeds all at once. The unripe one an kept in gyn hand, careful not to squish it.

The deer, if they had any sense, were long gone by now, and trying to find them would probably take too long. So now Clockwork just had to take what an could get, and persimmons at least were something an'd never turn gyn nose up at.

Thankfully, the egg cartons an'd brought had been on the side that did not slam into the ground or the oak tree, so they weren't

damaged.

An still also had all six canteens of blood, so the whole kill hadn't been a total waste.

Sighing in aggravation, an set about the task of picking over the persimmons that littered the ground, hoping an'd at least find a raccoon, opossum, groundhog, or even just some squirrels to shoot on the way home.

It didn't take long to fill the five empty egg carton's an had brought with dro, and Clockwork packed them away in the sidebag again once an was sure they were all latched properly. Getting persimmon pulp on your clothes was not fun.

Then an limited oid to only five minutes (or at least, as close as an could count in gyn head) of collecting acorns and pecans and shoving them into the other sidebag. Luckily, the deer preferred the persimmons over the pecans, so there were plenty for Clockwork to take without even making a dent. And, when an looked up to check out all the trees, there were still plenty left still clinging to the branches.

Foraging done, and feeling slightly more better now that an'd had

several persimmons and pecans to snack on, Clockwork started the long walk home, keeping gyn crossbow at the ready, just in case the sun felt like dropping another meaty meal in gyn path.

And, gyn optimism paying off, it was right as an was reaching the edge of the woods that an saw a flash of black and white in the trees up ahead. One of the lemurs Malakris Kiyori had shipped in from the southern continents and then released into the woods for who knew what fucking reason.

Clockwork had to move fast, but an got it, right between the eyes as it turned to look, and this time, wasted no time in shoving it under the blanket bag so no more opportunistic hunters would have a chance to steal it.

It wasn't a deer, but it was better than nothing.

Clockwork made it all the way safely home without any other mishaps, pockets weighed down with nuts and fruits, and hopeful that the clothier would be able to do something fancy with the lemur hide.

042: Character Creation

Neopronouns: xe/xir/xiv/xirix which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with xe

Replace him with xir

Replace his with xiv

Replace himself with xirix

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Xe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as xe gets a fence set up around xiv yard so the puppy can go outside without xir having to walk it. Xiv uncle is going to help set up the fence, since

he has a set of power tools he's letting xir use, since xe lost xir. Xe's going to buy toys and train the puppy xirix."

42: Character Creation

The room was white, bright, and cold.

No matter where xe moved, there was always a cold breeze sweeping down over xir from the ceiling. Xe had made a nest of a bed beneath the countertop along the short wall, but even under the sink there, the cold breeze still found its way to xiv skin.

Today the lights on the ceilings, walls, and floor had been turned up to their brightest, leaving xir with nowhere to hide to escape the burning glare. There were also lights built directly below the countertop that meant xiv bed wasn't even safe, even if xe hid xiv face beneath the blanket.

Xe had been though this before, though, more times than xe had bothered to keep track of. Xe knew what this meant – The People From the Other Side wanted to see xir, and trying to hide from the light would just mean being punished.

So xe did what xe always had to do when the lights were this bright - - xe stood in the middle of the room in a stance that set xiv feet wide, xiv tail held to one side and stretched rather than curled the way vey naturally wanted to, xiv shivering wings stretched to veir fullest, until the tips touched the walls, and waited for further instructions.

The long wall in front of xir was as blank and foreboding as always, the light from xiv reflection stretching and warping in ways that would make xir sick to xiv stomach if xe looked at it for too long.

Xe would have closed xiv eyes, but that was not allowed during inspections, except minimal blinking, so xe kept xiv gaze straight ahead, trying not to focus too much on the way the colors from xiv reflection was slowly swirling into a spiral.

It was rare that xe ever got a clear, stabilized reflection to look at, so the only reason xe knew what xe looked like at all was because the reflection had been steadier when xe'd been younger, and xe'd been a lot more foolhardy.

Once, xe had been incautious enough to approach the long wall closely enough that xe'd actually been able to see the details of the image reflecting back at xir, rather than just a blur of colors.

But xe had changed since then, grown up, and xe was no longer foolhardy enough to approach the long wall closely enough to see any details. The shock tiles had made sure of that.

From looking at xiv reflection, xe knew that xiv skin had once been a brownish pink, a color xe hadn't seen since. Then it had turned red,

then blue, then almost the same white as the room.

Xe'd formed spots, then stripes, then both at the same time, and complex patterns of both that xe'd long since lost track of.

For now, xiv skin was dark purple, with a blue iridescent sheen from certain angles. Xe was pretty sure xe could also see a pattern of tiny, lighter dots starting to form, following some logic xe couldn't fathom, but vey were too faint to be certain.

Xe hadn't always had xiv current wings or tail, either. Xe had almost always had some sort of tail, but different every time vey dropped off or began to grow in.

Once, just once, xe had had five tails at once, each one with a different pattern of spots or stripes, and different colored tufts of hair at the end.

Xiv wings were the one thing that had remained constant since xe had gotten vem. Before vem, xe had only had a single other pair – with feathers in blue and grey, rather than the dark purple and black bat-like wings xe had now.

Right now, xe had only two legs, both ending in cloven hooves. A

few times xe had had three, or four legs, ending in different types of feet, ranging from a cat paws, to frog-like feet, to knobs like stilts, to no feet at all, xiv legs atrophying away while a large snake's tail formed.

A few light cycles after that tail had formed in, xe had started to wonder if xe would be forced to pull xirix around by xir arms forever, before fish-like fin had started to form at the tip of the long, snake-like tail, while ridges began to form on xiv spine.

But then something somehow went wrong, and the process began to hurt. The pain was so shocking and sudden that xe had cried out, even though xe wasn't supposed to make any deliberate noises except during inspection, when ordered to go through the list of pre-set vocalizations and phrases.

The process of changing had never hurt before, never that xe could remember. But this time it did, with a sharp, stabbing pain where xiv hips were, above the tail, right where two smaller fins had been starting to grow in. And it just kept getting worse.

An inspection was immediately ordered, but xe was too shocked and in pain to obey. All xe could do was lie there curled on the floor, hands desperately reaching for a wound xe couldn't actually see or

touch.

The inspection order was canceled after a few painful minutes, and then the changes that had begun with the smaller fins, ridges, and tail-fin were finally halted, so the pain finally stopped getting worse.

But it didn't start to abate until a few hours later, when all the new parts had finally shriveled up and fallen off. And even then it didn't go away entirely, just became less intense.

Xe didn't think xe'd actually fallen asleep that cycle, so much as xe lost consciousness from exhaustion and stress.

As new legs began to grow in, there had been a lot more inspections for that growth cycle than there normally were for changes, but that had been the last time xe'd not had any legs.

Despite how quickly vey'd started forming, it had taken longer for xiv new legs to grow back after the snake tail atrophied than it had for vem to drop off in the first place, and ever since then, no matter how xiv legs or feet changed shape and form, xiv left hip always hurt.

This meant inspections quickly became painful if xe had to stand for

too long without being able to sit or lie down.

Today, as with the last few inspections, a red light on the top of the long wall lit up a few minutes after the lights brightened.

It still made xir nervous, even though nothing bad had happened so far.

Then something new happened, and the nervousness turned to fear. It took all xir willpower not to move, to stay in the approved stance, as that red light suddenly turned yellow.

Then, so suddenly xe couldn't help but flinch violently, a sound tore through the room, shrieking and drilling straight through xiv ears and into xiv skull as a voice, the first voice xe had heard in years other than xiv own, shouted, “Evacuate the facility! This is not a drill! Project Fenrir has escaped! This is not a drill! Everyone must evacuate immedia--”

The voice was cut off by a screech of static, right before a deafening boom resounded, and violently shook the walls and floor, knocking xir clean off xiv feet and onto xiv back.

By the time xe was no longer stunned from the fall, a new alarm was

sounding, screaming into xiv ears even more than the voice had, and the white lights had all turned red.

Throwing all rules away for pure instinct, xe flung xiv hands up to cover xiv ears, futilely trying to block out the sound, to no avail.

It was as xe was desperately scanning the room for somewhere to hide from the sound that xe suddenly realized that the long wall in front of xir was gone.

In its place...was another room, just as brightly lit by the red light, filled with tables and counters and chairs, and, at the back, a door that hung ajar, opening into shadows.

Shadows meant safety. Xe was no longer thinking, all xe knew was that xe needed to get away from the sound that felt like it was trying to kill xir.

One wing partly out-stretched for balance, xe stumbled back to xiv feet, then ran, hands still clamped over xiv ears, out of the white room, into the next one, and through the door that led to somewhere new, without any thoughts left to spare for worrying what would be waiting for xir beyond it.

043: When in Doubt, Leave Gifts

Neopronouns: li/lia/lia/lia/lia/lia which follow the same rules as
he/him/his/himself

Replace he with li

Replace him with lia

Replace his with lia

Replace himself with lia/lia

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Li is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as li gets a fence set

up around Lias yard so the puppy can go outside without Lia having to walk it. Lias uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting Lia use, since Li lost Lias. Li's going to buy toys and train the puppy Liaself."

043: When in Doubt, Leave Gifts

There was something uniquely terrifying about knowing a feral superhero was hiding underneath your car, just a few feet away.

There was maybe fifty feet from the steps of the front door to the dumpster at the end of the parking lot. Neva had only realized that Kytin was hiding under her car after li'd gotten more than halfway across the parking lot with the heavy trashbag over lias shoulder.

If Kytin had held still, Neva probably wouldn't have realized that she was there. But she had moved as li got closer to the car, and even though the shadows under the car were deep in the quickly falling twilight, it was enough to attract Neva's attention, and lias eyes were sharp enough, even in the darkness, to pick out the tell-tale pattern of black, red, and white stripes on Kytin's exoskeleton.

Li hadn't frozen or jumped or anything, no, it was sheer force of trained habit that kept lia walking casually towards the dumpster. Li spent her free time taking pictures of wildlife, and most of the time, if you acted like you hadn't seen them yet, they wouldn't flee, which would give lia enough time to get lias camera out and take pictures as long as li did it casually enough.

Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

But this time, li didn't have lias camera, and this was not a brown thrasher or a deer, or a bluejay. No, no, this was *Kytin*. Kytin. Hiding under lias car. Hiding from lia. Afraid of lia, just as she was afraid of all other people, besides her partners, Nightshock and Vyper.

If Kytin was here, did that mean the other two were nearby?

Li tried to keep lias cool and continue acting natural as li approached the dumpster, hesitating for a few heart beats before slowing lias pace, and calling out, more halfheartedly than usual, in a song-singing tone, “If there's any animals in the dumpster, watch out, I'm gonna put trash in there, I don't want to scare you...”

There came no sudden rustlings of plastic, or bangs as a startled animal sprinted away. Nor were there any ominous clicking noises from under the car li knew Kytin was hiding. Or at least, where Kytin had been hiding. Who knew? Maybe she was stalking up behing lia right now —

But the parking lot was silent, except for the high buzz of a cicada up in the oaks and willows, and, willing lias heart to slow down to a normal rate, li shoved the trashbag through the already open sliding

door, chanting a mental prayer to the guardian stars that it wouldn't turn out that Nightshock or Vyper were for some reason hiding inside the dumpster.

Li already had raccoons and opossums getting into the trash, li didn't want to have to worry about accidentally hitting one of the local superheroes in the face with a bag of dirty cat litter.

When li pulled the dumpster door shut and was finally able to turn around, it was to find an empty parking lot waiting for lia, no angry, feral superhero waiting to meet lias gaze before li would meet lias death.

Why Kytin would want to kill lia, li couldn't actually come up with a good reason. There really was no reason, it was just creepy as heck to realize someone was watching you from under a car in a dark parking lot at 1AM.

Li began the walk back from the dumpster, and passed by the car li'd noticed Kytin hiding under the first time.

To lias relief, Kytin was still there. It would have been even more unnerving if she'd disappeared. If you at least knew where she was, that meant she wasn't sneaking up behind you or something.

It was hard to tell with the shadows, but li thought Kytin had relaxed a little bit, maybe looked a little less stressed out. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

Li got back to the front door and inside lias house with no problem. A minute or two later, li emerged again, just long enough to sit a basket of hard-boiled eggs in the middle of the grass, halfway between the parking lot and the front door, with a cardboard sign in front of it with a hastily drawn symbol for “giving” scribbled on it in marker.

When morning dawned at 11AM, li peeked through the kitchen window, then went out to collect the now empty basket, the cardboard sign now flipped upside down in the grass in the direction of lias house, weighed down with a palm-sized, white and grey striped rock that sparkled in the sunlight.

The news that day covered the story of the destruction of American Timberline, the logging company that had been trying to bulldoze ancient guardian trees on the far side of the city.

The owner of the company had been found dead in his office from one of Vyper's bites. All the logging trucks were overturned, their tires in shreds, all the tools that would have been turned against the

trees reduced to shreds of useless metal. The “Reforesters” were now violently rebelling against their programming, defending the forest keepers from the police and Timberline-funded mercenaries who had been trying to force a way past them to make way for the bulldozers for months.

The news was live, so li got to watch first hand as one of the Reforesters ripped a picket sign, which read, “I want to be a homeowner” out of one of the mercenaries hands, and hit him repeatedly over the head with it until he turned and stumbled away to the illusion of safety in the fleeing crowd of cops.

That news segment ended when Vyper, Nightshock, and Kytin suddenly appeared out of the edge of the forest, leading the charge of what seemed to be hundreds of deer, foxes, raccoons, birds, and too many insects to count. The stampede parted around the forest keepers and Reforesters (and journalists) like water, and bowled over the cops and mercenaries without mercy. The broadcast cut off when Kytin began one of her songs, so that the picture dropped almost immediately into static.

Yeah, li was going to have to make some more hard-boiled eggs to leave out tonight...

044: Malfunction or Mutiny

Neopronouns: fae/faer/faerself which follow the same rules as she/her/(hers)/herself

Replace she with fae

Replace her with faer

Replace hers with faers

Replace herself with faerself

EX:

"She is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as she gets a fence set up around her yard so the puppy can go outside without her having to walk it. Her uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting her use, since she lost hers. She's going to buy toys and train the puppy herself."

Becomes:

"Fae is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as fae gets a fence

set up around faer yard so the puppy can go outside without faer having to walk it. Faer uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting faer use, since fae lost faers. Fae's going to buy toys and train the puppy faerself."

044: Malfunction or Mutiny

“--Look, if we can just stick to the plan and keep detours to a minimum, it's going to take us an extra two weeks to get to City, but we'll get there. We just have to conserve as much fuel as we can. Only minimal lights at night, okay? We've got plenty of candles, we can use those for reading light, and save the batteries. Copy?”

Fae waited for the response, which should have come almost immediately. No one was allowed to go anywhere without their radio, and the radios operated on separate batteries than the boats.

“Do you copy?” Fae repeated, starting to get simultaneously concerned and frustrated. All day, faer requests for information on the radio had gone unanswered almost half the time. Most of the soldiers weren't answering even for basic necessary checks. But now not even Vrx. Dreland wasn't answering faer?

Either he was dead, or...fae had a bigger problem on faer hands than just malfunctioning radios.

The crossboards had already been lowered for the night, and through the darkness below the cloudy sky, fae could see the lights shining faintly through the fog over the black waves.

It was a long walk over the crossboard to reach the other side of the caravan. Stationed in the directory, fae was the only one on this side. There should have been at least fifteen other people to help faer, at minimum, but that...just wasn't going to happen any time soon. Too many people were afflicted with the plague, there just weren't enough people well enough to help fill out the caravan roster.

The only reason fae was even able to be here in the first place was because the Arvretian military had volunteered to help fill out the staff with the Verix Unit. A mission of mercy was, the Admiral said, always a worthy quest for the Verix Unit.

Fae had just been too relieved to question that statement when fae'd heard it. It'd been two full days since fae'd slept, too busy frantically trying to muster nonexistent personnel to help complete the mission to City, and the next thing fae knew with any clarity was waking up on the first day of the mission, feeling like absolute shit with a pounding headache and feeling so tired it was almost like fae'd never slept at all.

By the time fae'd gotten done just doing the bare minimum of heating up faer rations in the oven under the solar shield, there were so many other things to worry and think about besides questioning by the military was so eager to send one of its most highly trained

combat forces on a mission of peace.

True, City was legally part of Arvretia, and had been since it had been annexed fifty years before, but the resistance was still fighting strong, and most “real Arvretians”, despite the forceful demands of the government, did not consider it to really be apart of the country, and thought the people who lived there were parasites “leeching off Arvretian blood to further their own agendas”, completely glossing over the fact that it was Arvretia that had conquered City, rather than City demanding to be made part of Arvretia.

That first day on the caravan, though, fae hadn't had time to think about any of that. There were too many inventories to complete and maps to triple-check and make sure all the solar panels were working the way they should and that the solar shield wasn't damaged.

For the first few days, everything had gone...well, as well as could be expected for a caravan with only one trained member of the staff.

But then the fuel tank had turned out to only have a little more than half of what they should have. Vrx. Dreland had gone on a rage, swearing and yelling and cursing incompetent loaders and checkers at the port so loudly that fae had to turn faer radio's volume down to the lowest audible setting to stop it from bursting into static

overload.

Vrx. Dreland had seemed so genuinely upset that fae'd chocked the loss up to an accident. The port was just as severely understaffed as they were, it wasn't anyone's fault that part of their fuel allotment got misplaced. They could still make it to City with careful rationing of power resources. Lower speeds, letting the wind push them when it could, and only the minimum requirement of lights at night to avoid a collision with another boat.

(Not that there were likely to be any other boats out at sea, but no one was expecting them to be out here, either, so they had to assume they weren't the only ones).

But now this. A whole day with only spotty communications, and now Vrx. Dreland himself seemed to be ignoring faer.

Fae gave it one last try with the radio, asking, "Do you copy? Vrx. Dreland, are you receiving me?"

But still the only response fae got back was the buzz of empty static.

Fae stared out the small porthole and over the long, dark crossboard, the sky above almost as black as the waves below, the only lights

visible the white, flickering squares of the other boats, pulled up in single-file, the metal of the hull lost in the darkness.

...One way or another, whether this was a malfunction or a mutiny...

Fae was going to have to go over there...

045: Viva La Revolution

Neopronouns: rhe/rhek/rhel/rhellis which follow the same rules as he/him/his/himself.

Replace he with rhe

Replace him with rhek

Replace his with rhel

Replace himself with rhellis

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"Rhe is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as rhe gets a fence

set up around rhel yard so the puppy can go outside without rhek having to walk it. Rhel uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting rhek use, since rhe lost rhel. Rhe's going to buy toys and train the puppy rhellis.”

045: Viva La Revolution

Suddenly shoved off the dragon's back, the had no time to brace rhellis before rhe slammed into the ground with enough force to violently knock the air from rhel lungs.

Pain burst all down rhel side where rhe'd landed, and not just from the fall. The sand rhe had landed on was burning hot. With rhel arms tied behind rhel back, rhe struggled to get to rhel feet, gasping in pain, rhel voice muffled through the cloth still tied over rhel mouth.

"Hey, be careful!" A voice shouted from somewhere above. A moment later a massive shadow fell over rhek again, and rhe felt the impact on the ground as another dragon landed practically on top of rhek, blogging out the sun with its shining red hide.

Two clawed hands, each the size of rhel head grabbed rhek around the middle before rhe had time to react, and then rhe was in the air again.

The dragon had barely taken two wingbeats upward before there came a metallic screech like clashing metal, and then the entire world was spinning and jarring as rhe was knocked violently loose from the red dragon's grip and sent slamming once more into the

burning sand.

Dragons were roaring and shrieking overhead, and the men were roaring right along with them, and rhe couldn't make out a single word. They were fighting over rhek, and where rhe should be placed, that much was clear. The red dragon had not wanted rhek to be left on the burning sand. The gold dragon's rider, the same man who had kidnapped rhek, clearly disagreed.

Rhe was not going to stick around to see who won the argument. Rhe had managed to stumble to rhel feet, hissing at the white hot pain as rhel bare feet touched the sand with all rhel weight on top.

Unable to see anything further than the small patch of sunlight rhe was in, rhe made for the direction that seemed to be the furthest from the fighting dragons overhead.

The shadows passed over rhek, but did nothing to ease the temperature of the sand. Then suddenly rhe found cool, solid stone beneath rhel, only slightly easing the burning lain in rhel feet.

Rhel eyes were adjusting to the darkness, so rhe found the first thing that looked like shelter, and leapt behind it. It was a large praised portion of rock like a counter, tall enough for rhek to crouch behind

to get the wright of rhel feet.

The sounds of the dragonfight were still raging over the crater, which, as rhe scanned the area, was so far rhel only known way of escaping the eyrie. There were no doorways or stairs or even other openings in the rock that rhe could see from rhel current position.

Rhe crawled to the furthest edge of rhel hiding spot and craned rhel neck to try and see if there was an escape rout across on the other side. But the sunlight stabbing down into the center opening was too bright, and rhe couldn't see past it.

And it was only then, as rhe stared hard at the sunlight, that rhe finally noticed the whole reason rhe had been brought here in the first place.

On the far side of the patch if sunlight, sparkling with dazzling reflections, was what was unmistakably a dragon's egg. The egg of the queen dragon, who rhe had been brought here to be soul-bonded with.

The dragonmen needed a new queen, and needed a rider for that queen, and they thought they could get one by assaulting rhel family's farm, kidnapping rhek, and treating rhek like some object,

less even than an animal.

The dragonmen had gotten used to the idea that they could bully and threaten people into doing whatever they wanted, with no consequences.

Rhe was going to prove them wrong.

046: 046

Neopronouns: Hero/heros/heroself which follow the same rules as it/its/itself.

Replace it with hero

Replace its with heros

Replace itself with heroself

EX:

"It is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as it gets a fence set up around its yard so the puppy can go outside without it having to walk it. Its uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting it use, since it lost its. It's going to buy toys and train the puppy itself."

Becomes:

"Hero is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as hero gets a fence set up around heros yard so the puppy can go outside without hero having to walk it. Heros uncle is going to help set up the fence,

since he has a set of power tools he's letting hero use, since hero lost heros. Hero's going to buy toys and train the puppy heroself."

046: 046

The sky had been threatening a storm for over an hour, and, quite suddenly, it made good on that threat.

One moment, all Alpaen had to contend with was the wind, and the cold it bore with it. The next, the rain was coming sheeting down, sweeping visibly up the street like a malevolent spirit.

It struck hero all at once, slamming in to soak heros hair and clothes within moments of the downpour. Then the rain conspired with the wind to shock what felt like every last drop of warmth from heros bones.

Huddled into heroself as best as hero could, the stone below hero did nothing to help, its surface as cold as ice, sapping more warmth out of heroes legs even through the fabric of heros thick, fluffy pajama pants.

Alpaen had nowhere to go. No shelter to turn to. Hero had no friends, no one hero could trust. The abandoned buildings were once again being patrolled by cops to scare off the homeless, a category that now included hero, but now this time, there was nothing hero could do about it. Hero couldn't even help heroself, let alone anyone

else.

It would be at least three more days until heros powers came back, and that was only if hero not only took Verdict at vir word, but also trusted that vi knew what vi was talking about in the first place.

And why, exactly, did Verdict have any idea how Ferros' experiments worked, anyways? Since when did vi want anything to do with X? The last time hero had checked, just two weeks ago, Verdict had been trying to kill X. Desperately.

But then, maybe hero wasn't the first mutant Ferros had captured this month.

Maybe Verdict had had a very good reason for wanting to kill X, with so little regard for vir own safety that vi'd almost died from vir injuries trying to fight through what had seemed like an endless flood of Ferros' avatars. With vir mutation, it was hard to tell what was happening under all those spikes and fur.

Maybe hero could take vir word for it that, three days from now, hero'd be able to shapeshift at will again, and leave behind not only all the things hero hated about the body hero'd had to deal with since puberty, but all the new things hero wanted to stop being reminded

of every time hero looked at heroself.

Alpaen had been able to bear the unwanted changes from puberty while hero knew that as soon as the school bell rang, as soon as heros mom left the house, as soon as hero could lock heros door and know she wouldn't come beating it down demanding to be let in...hero could simply change heros body into the one hero desperately wanted.

It had been bearable, as long as hero knew that it wouldn't last. Hero had always had that reprieve to cling to, that relief.

But now that was gone, and so many worse things had swept in to take its place, and the only hope hero had left to cling to that hero would ever get it back was the word of a self-styled Villain.

There hadn't been any way to hide the fact that Alpaen'd been missing for five days. Even if heros mom had, by some miracle, not noticed heros absence, Springs Mill had. You couldn't just miss five days of school without anyone noticing.

Heros mom had called the police and reported hero missing, the first night. The cops of course had done nothing.

For the first few seconds after she walked in the door to their apartment to see Alpaen slumped on the couch, tiredly eating barely thawed frozen pancakes, for just a few seconds, maybe even a dozen heartbeats, she'd been relieved, through her shock. Overjoyed to see hero.

But then her brain had caught up to what her eyes were seeing.

--If you could project yourself back in time and stand invisibly in the room, you could actually watch and see the exact moment she took in the glowing green lines tracing over heros exposed skin, and the unmistakable metal knobs still protruding from heros arms and legs. The number stamped in bright white on the back of heroes left hand.

If you pulled aside any random kid on the street and asked them what all these details, combined with a sudden disappearance, meant, they'd be able to tell you, without a moment of hesitation: You were looking at a mutant who'd been captured, experimented on, and then released by Ferros.

And that would have fine, her knowing that hero was a mutant, knowing that hero'd been captured and tortured. She was very vocally pro mutant. Her older sister had been a mutant. She would probably have hired the best therapist money could buy if it was just

that her child was a mutant. And if that therapist didn't help she'd hire another one.

The problem was not heros mother finding out hero was a mutant. It wasn't that her child was going to need her help and support to recover from this ordeal.

No.

That wasn't the problem.

The problem was the realization that hero, her child, was Changeling, the city-designated villain who was openly trans and nonbinary lesbian, only answering to the ironic pronouns of hero/heros/heroself.

Changeling, who had brazenly robbed her company's CEO on live television in his own home, and had, along with dozens of other city-designated villains, declared outright war on the police and the city-designated heroes who were on their side.

She could forgive the assault and robbery of her CEO. She didn't really like him anyways, he was a misogynist and was always making lewd jokes. She could even forgive the fighting with the

cops. She had a love-hate relationship with the government, where she thought it was simultaneously too big when it wanted her to pay taxes so poor kids could eat lunch at school, but also not big enough when she wanted refugees to be hunted down and shoved back over the borders.

She could twist her paradoxical ideas about the police – too strong when they were giving her a speeding ticket in a school zone, too weak when they hadn't rounded up all the homeless people in the city and tossed them in jail yet – into a shape that let her convince herself that her child was only fighting them to stand up against injustices like speeding tickets and other traffic violations, things she cared about, and not that hero'd been fighting to defend the very same 'degenerates and predators' she wanted removed from the city streets. The homeless, the poor, the Queer, the people of color, the disabled...

No, she did not have a problem with hero fighting the cops.

But everyone knew that Changeling had been captured by Ferros. Several villain-cams had caught the altercation on film, and it had been shared through her favorite Neighborhood Watch groups.

Changeling going missing, and her child going missing, could have

been just a coincidence. But that was when she thought her child was a normal human, not a mutant.

She'd have had no problem if Alpaen was just a mutant. But hero wasn't. Hero was Changeling, the most flagrantly and proudly Queer villain on their side of the city.

And that she could not condone.

She had gone on a rant, raging and screaming so loudly that if their neighbors hadn't both been at work, the ovolume would have brought the police to their door.

Just because Alpaen (But she didn't say Alpaen, even though hero'd just told her heros chosen name, she deadnamed hero, and put stress on every pronoun to drive the hatred in like a knife between the ribs) was a mutant didn't mean hero wasn't the gender hero'd been assigned at birth. The words themselves were nothing but complimentary, but the voice was filled with scathing rage and hatred.

Heros body changing shape did not mean hero wasn't still the gender hero'd been assigned at birth. Just because heros body could changed didn't mean heros spirit was changing too.

Alpaen tried the best hero could to explain, that hero had always felt this way, even before hero'd developed the power to shapeshift, even before hero'd had the words “trans” and “nonbinary” to describe what hero was feeling.

But Alpaen's mom thought that hero was calling heroself nonbinary just because hero was a shapeshifter.

She didn't understand, nor did she care, that even in a world where no one had superpowers, where no one could change their shape except through surgery, even in a world where magic didn't exist, even in a universe where hero wasn't a shapeshifter or even a mutant, hero would still be nonbinary. Would still be transgender. Would still want to change heros body to match what hero felt it should look like in heros guts.

She had the cause and effect backwards. She thought hero was nonbinary because hero was a shapeshifter.

She didn't understand that if hero weren't nonbinary, the only shapeshifting hero would be doing would be hiding heros identity and for fighting.

If hero weren't nonbinary, hero would just be changing the color of

heros hair and tweaking heros voice and changing up the structure of heros facial bones and height, just enough that no one would recognize hero, even without heros amphibisona. Or just the more extreme things like growing wings when hero needed to fly, or squeezing through thin cracks under doors.

Alpaen had figured out hero was nonbinary long before hero manifested the mutation that let hero shapeshift. But no amount of begging or pleading or crying had let hero convince heros mom of any of that. Hero'd wanted to shout at her, but she'd just shouted hero down every time, all but literally covering her ears for what hero had to say.

Hero'd been kicked out without any chance to grab any of heros things.

All hero had now were the clothes on heros back, and that didn't amount to much – just heros favorite, worn out hoodie, and fluffy pajama pants. Both had leopard pattern spots, in slightly different shades of brown and yellow, since they were from different brands and bought years apart. Hero'd owned the hoodie so long, and worn it so often, that the elbows were bare threads. It had long since outlived its ability to keep hero warm, but Alpaen hadn't ever been able to work up the heart to throw it away, no matter how many

times hero was nagged or made fun of about it by heros mom, teachers, or classmates.

Alpaen hadn't even been allowed to bring heros shoes. Heros mom had just laughed in heros face and told hero that if hero didn't want to go without shoes, then hero should use heros nonbinary freak powers to grow some new ones.

She knew just as well as anyone by this point that mutants who were captured by Ferros couldn't use their powers for several days afterward, if they ever regained the ability to use their powers in the first place.

Some people never got them back.

Hero had only heros socks to keep heros feet warm, and they were already soaked through with rain.

To put it simply: Alpaen was freezing cold, soaking wet, had no friends or family to stay with, hadn't eaten anything in five days except what Verdict had given hero, and the single Pop-Tart hero'd eaten at home before being discovered and kicked out, and to make all these things even worse, the library, where hero'd thought hero'd at least be able to find temporary shelter from the elements, was

closed.

Alpaen would only learn this later, but while hero had been locked away in Ferros' lab, there'd been an attempted shooting at the library. The only reason nobody had died was because one of the librarians had secretly been Javelina, and she'd been able to take down the would-be gunman before he could fire on anyone.

Then the police had shown up, and instead of arresting the shooter, decided that Javelina was holding the library hostage, despite all the protests of the regular people inside, Javelina, and even the shooter himself.

The whole horrific event had only ended when Bulldozer and several other as-yet-unnamed city-designated villains surrounded and killed the police, and teleported the victims, including Javelina, away to safety so they could get home, or wherever they needed to go, without having to parade in front of the news cameras.

Hero had noticed, if only subconsciously, that the roads for several blocks leading up to the library were emptied of cars, and no one seemed to be home. The city rulers had decided to react to the incident by arresting, or at least trying to arrest, everyone who'd witnessed it in person, or even just been in the general vicinity. To

“prevent the spread of false news designed to invoke distrust in the police”, they said.

If Alpaen's mom hadn't come home right when she did, Alpaen would have been able to see a recap of the story on the news, but fate had it that heros mom had come home and just the right time for hero to miss the memo that the shelter offered by the library was no longer available.

This meant that Alpaen had to spend almost an entire hour sitting alone, cold and miserable beyond words, on the freezing steps of the library in the rain, heros body wracked with sobs as hero finally cried with the tsunami of emotions that had built up over the past week.

This also meant, though, that when the dark red minivan turned the corner at the end of the street and began to approach, the headlights shone on Alpaen, so that when hero looked up, hero had to lift a hand to shield heros eyes from the glare.

And the person inside the car saw the telltale signs of Ferros' mistreatment, glowing neon green even in headlamps, seeming brighter still in its contrast against Alpaen's dark brown skin.

All of the events proceeding these moments meant that when that minivan pulled up in front of the steps leading up to the library, and the door on the side pulled open, Alpaen was sitting there, tired, cold, in pain, drenched, and desperate for any help.

At first hero couldn't see anything inside the car, then someone clicked the overhead light on, and hero was met with a familiar sight – one hero hadn't been expecting.

“You look like you could use some help. Want a lift?” Verdict, in vir full costume and mask, asked, voice pitched to be audible over the pounding of the rain.

Vi was sitting in the middle section of the van, leaning towards the open door across the armrest. Vir usual horns were notably missing – Alpaen could only assume they were too tall to fit in the car without gouging the roof. An unfamiliar person was sitting in the driver's seat, features obscured under a hoodie and lower face mask, staying facing forward, head turning slowly to scan the two empty roads on either side. A large yellow beach towel had been draped over the seat inside the open door.

For a few seconds, Alpaen stared at that open door, and the shelter offered by it. Waves of warmth were fighting their way free through

the rain, just barely touching the tip of heros nose before being dashed away by the downpour.

It took a few long heartbeats of sitting, freezing and shivering in the rain, for hero to decide that the reasons to trust Verdict far outweighed the reasons not to.

Verdict had set up camp at Ferros' dumping grounds, and had been the first friendly face hero had seen (or rather, not seen, hidden behind vir draconic mask) since hero'd been kidnapped days before.

Vi had given hero the first food hero'd had since Ferros had grabbed hero. It hadn't been much – a few scrambled eggs and some toast, cooked over vir very own fire in vir camp at the edge of the clearing – but the food, and the compassion and caring literally baked into it, had been enough to ensure that Alpaen could get all the way home, driven there in this very car, without simply collapsing into a singularity of despair.

Alpaen had thought hero could trust heros mom, but she had betrayed hero, cast hero aside like hero was worth nothing.

Hero had never expected to find any ally in Verdict, the self-proclaimed Villain with a capital V.

But vi was the one who had waited for hero to be released, and vi was the one who was here now, offering shelter, and not just from the rain.

Vi had made this offer earlier, when vir mysterious friend had first driven hero home from the woods. If heros secret identity was revealed, if heros family wasn't accepting, or if hero needed help, hero could come to vir. Vi could offer food, clothing, and a place to sleep and spend the day, far enough away from the prying eyes of the cops that if hero didn't want to be found, it would be, not impossible, but more effort than most people would be willing to put in to figure out where hero'd gone.

Probably, vi had said, the only one who would be able to track hero would be Ferros Xself. Vi had been wearing vir full costume then, too, so Alpaen hadn't been able to see if vi had a matching scar on vir upper arm – the glowing purple circle that marked the tracker Ferros placed in each of X victims.

No one had been able to remove them without irreparably damaging themselves, not even those whose mutation gave them the ability to heal at a faster rate. Trying to remove the tracker didn't just damage your arm – it wreaked havoc on your whole nervous system.

And that was if you could muster up the guts to try and get it removed in the first place.

Alpaen had spent the last few hours trying not to think about the tracker embedded in heros arm. Thinking about it for too long, and thinking about removing it, in particular, caused a surge of irrational panic and anxiety in the victim that was impossible to resist.

Hero had gotten a good enough look at heros when Ferros had implanted it, along with the number X had assigned Alpaen. X gave all X victims numbers. No one knew who the first few victims had been. People had only started coming forward after number 008.

Marked directly under the transmitter, glowing burning green against heros dark skin, was the number “046”. Which meant there were at least 45 victims who'd come before hero, and who knew how many who would come after.

Did Verdict have the number 045 marked on vir arm, hidden under that armour?

Hero wasn't going to ask. Vi was still waiting for Alpaen's answer to vir offer of...what was so much more than a ride, still leaning across the seat, vir eyeless mask as impassive as ever. But hero didn't need

to be a mind reader to know that vi wanted Alpaen to say yes. Vi wanted to help.

And there weren't any good reasons for hero to say no. Hero had nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. Heros mom had disowned hero. The cops would, at best, toss hero in jail for loitering before even asking any questions. All of the official homeless shelters in the city had been shut down or burned down, and the unofficial ones were slowly being pressed out of existence.

Alpaen had to struggle to get to heros feet, the cold numbing heros hands and feet and making heros joints slow and uncooperative. Hero couldn't even feel heros fingers anymore. But hero made it down the stairs, into the van, and into the towel-draped seat without incident. The difference in temperature was immediate, warmth enveloping hero before hero'd even sat down.

Alpaen went to drag the van door shut with one numb hand, only to be met with resistance. But before hero could yank again in frustration, Verdict held out a hand, and said, “Just give it a moment, it's automatic. Pull it again, just a little, and let go. It'll shut on its own.”

Alpaen did as instructed, and watched in bafflement as the car door

slowly slid its way shut and securely latched itself.

Hero let heroself fall back against the seat in sudden exhaustion, and tiredly pulled the seatbelt across and clicked it into place.

“We're buckled and ready to go.” Verdict said. The person in the driver's seat nodded, and only then did the car begin to move, pulled away from the stairs and back onto the road, performing a very illegal U-turn to get back the way they'd come. Alpaen didn't think there was anyone in the abandoned houses to notice or care.

Heros hands began to prickle with pins and needles as they regained feeling. Hero knew heros face would soon follow where the wind had bitten at hero's cheeks and nose. Hero hadn't even been allowed to take any of heros covid masks when hero'd been kicked out, a fact that was abruptly beating a dent into heros self-possession.

Homeless, cold, hungry, tired, in pain, and in a car with people without a mask.

“Sorry.” Alpaen managed to bite out, fighting with all heros strength not to start crying again.

Verdict didn't seem to understand what hero was apologizing for,

because vi replied, “Don't be, this van has handled a lot worse than some rainwater.” Then vi added, “It'll be about an hour until we get where we're going, and you'll be able to change out of those wet clothes when we get there, but if you're comfortable with it and trust me, I can offer a flame to help dry them now. It won't harm you, it promises not to, but some people are too afraid of fire to get to know it. Would you like to see it now before you make up your mind? You can always change your mind later.”

Heros eyelids were starting to feel heavy, heros bones seeming to want to drag hero down into the core of the Earth as well-earned exhaustion began to take over heros body. But hero was still awake enough to follow what Verdict was saying, and understand what vi was offering.

“I'll take one.” hero said. Hero didn't need any demonstration, hero'd already seen vir flames too many times to count. Hero knew they wouldn't do anything to hurt anyone vi didn't want them to. And if vi wanted to hurt hero, vi had had plenty of opportunities to do it before now that wouldn't ruin the upholstery of vir fancy car with automatic doors.

“Say the word and I'll desummon it immediately.” Verdict instructed, then lifted a hand, fingers pressed together. Vi drew them apart, and

a small, round yellow flame drew itself into existence with the movement. It hovered over vir hand for a few seconds, swirling into itself, casting yellow and orange flickering shadows over the walls and ceiling.

Then it began to uncurl itself, growing bigger as it did so, until it was in a form that was unmistakably that of a cat, Verdict's other hand going up to support its back feet.

“Hold your hands out to create a platform, and it can come to you.” Vi said. Alpaen obeyed, mesmerized by the way the flames moved. As hero watched, hero could have sworn that rosettes were visible, flickering at the surface of the fire, each one lasting only a few moments before it was gone.

The touch of the flame's paw on heros hand was not burning hot, the way heros mind had expected it to be despite all heros rationality arguing that it wouldn't hurt. It was not hot enough to burn, but it was warm.

Hero didn't know how to pick up the flame other than hold heros hands flat the way Verdict was, but luckily the flame had ideas of its own, and easily hopped down off heros hands and onto heros lap, where it curled up into a cat-shaped ball.

The flame didn't purr, not like a real cat would have, but it did radiate warmth in every direction, and that was just as welcome. Hero could practically feel the water evaporating out of heros clothes one drop at a time.

Alpaen wasn't consciously aware of closing heros eyes, the only thing hero knew, or cared about at that moment, was that hero was warm, hero was safe, and more than anything else, hero was tired.

Hero slept, and the car drove on in silence into the dark.

047:

Neopronouns: which follow the same rules as

Replace he with

Replace him with

Replace his with

Replace himself with

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

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Becomes:

051: Neither Nor

Neopronouns: de/ad/ath/adself, used the same way as he/him/his/himself for this story.

Replace he with de

Replace him with ad

Replace his with ath

Replace himself with adself

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

Becomes:

"De is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as de gets a fence

set up around ath yard so the puppy can go outside without ad having to walk it. Ath uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting ad use, since de lost ath. De's going to buy toys and train the puppy adself"

51: Neither Nor

Patricia climbed the basements stairs one tired step at a time, juggling more than an armload's worth of mugs, and trying to make sure she didn't drop any. She'd finally used up all the mugs in the house for her coffee, and now she had to get the kids to wash them so the cycle could start all over again.

She always made herself coffee as soon as she got up in the morning, brought it down with her into the lab, drank it, and then left the mug to sit somewhere out of the way, forgetting to bring it back upstairs with her to be washed. And then the same thing happened the next day, and the next day, and the next day, until she'd used up all the mugs and they were all down in the lab in some forgotten corner.

The good news was that there was so much ambient ectoplasm in the lab after all the years of experiments and explosions that protoghosts spawned at a fairly regular rate, and, created in the real world as opposed to the ghost zone, they seemed to be attracted to food rather than ectoplasm. Every time it was time to bring the mugs back upstairs, she was sure to find at least a dozen different forms of postconsciousness inhabiting the mugs, slowly consuming the dregs of coffee that had been left behind, and replacing it with the ghostly equivalent of guano.

The protohosts themselves were mostly useless, but their guano was valuable- -it could be converted into extremely efficient ectopowered batteries that were then used to power their weapons, shields, nets, and other prototypes.

Granted, allowing the protohosts to colonize her used coffee mugs wasn't the most efficient way to collect their waste, but setting up a proper containment area and making sure safety procedures were actually in place would be expensive, and time consuming. It was far easier to just put the kids in charge of it. They kept ectoplasm containment units in the pantry with the rest of the tupperware, and this had been one of Kara and Tanner's chores since they were old enough to lift a spoon.

She pushed the basement door open with her hip, calling out, "Tanner- -!" Only to stop in surprise when she saw he was already in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a red notebook. She smiled widely. Now she wouldn't have to go through the effort of dragging him out of his room. "Oh, there you are, sweetie! Perfect!" She lifted the mugs, then went over to dump them into the sink, saying cheerfully, "You know what time it is! I want these mugs squeaky clean by lunch time, and I want all the guano sorted by ectotype and recorded on the computer, and when you're done that, you can help-
-"

Tanner tried to interrupt her. "Mom- -"

She carried on like she hadn't heard him. He couldn't weasel his way out of his chores, not if he wanted to get paid for them. She sorted the mugs in the sink from most ectoplasmically contaminated to least while she continued, "Clean out the garage, since your father's already collected more junk, so I need you to sort through it and make a list of what's there so I know what's salvageable and useful, what's actual trash, and what we can cannibalize. When you're done that, we can- -"

"Mom, can you just pause for a minute?" Tanner's voice was louder this time, more insistent, and she huffed in exasperation while she turned around from the sink, prepared to scold him for being rude, only to stop when she saw his expression. There was a seriousness there she wasn't used to seeing on her son's face. She felt her heart skip a beat in alarm.

"I'm not trying to argue about my chores," He said, hunching his shoulders defensively, "I just need to talk to you. Can you- -can you sit down?" He gestured at the kitchen table.

Her mind immediately running through all the possibilities of what he could be about to confess- -failing grades, being suspended from

school again, being in trouble with the police- -Tanner had been acting strange for the past year, and she thought was prepared for all but the absolute worst possibilities. Tanner had once been such a good, quiet boy, but ever since their last vacation to go camping, he'd been acting out, misbehaving at school, skipping classes, having a temper at home, not turning in his homework, not completing his chores, hanging out with that strange new girl with the bad reputation, running around at all hours of the night and refusing to say where he'd been...

She wasn't sure she wanted to know what he'd done now that was so serious he finally felt the need to come to her about it, after all the months she and Tracy had spent trying to convince him to talk to them.

But she didn't say any of that out loud, just regarded him suspiciously while she took the proffered seat. "Alright, Tanner," She said, trying to get her mind to stop imagining horrible scenarios. Even if it would lead to her being pleasantly surprised when it wasn't that bad, she still didn't like thinking about all the horrible things her son could have gotten into to put this expression on his face. "I'm listening."

For a moment, there was silence in the room, except for the soft

humming of one of the protohosts, the sound reverberating off the stainless steel of the sink.

Tanner shifted in his seat, then grabbed the notebook that was in front of him, lifting it so the back was facing her while he ran his fingers along the spine and creating a soft ziiping sound from his fingernail hitting the metal.

She looked at the cardboard backing, raising an eyebrow at the many black and blue scratch marks in pen where things had been written or drawn, with some of them crossed out in thick black marker, leaving only some shiny outlines still visible in the black ink. There were many drawings of eyes, some simple, some more detailed, in blue and black ink, and a few in purple or blue glitter gel. Some of them were colored in with marker or red pen, all different. There was no space on the back that didn't have some sort of drawing on it, in some shape or form.

It didn't give her any hint about what this conversation was going to be about, besides that Tanner really shouldn't be covering his notebooks in drawings. That was another thing his teachers had been complaining to her about, and now she saw why.

More silence.

She was beginning to wonder how long they would have to sit here before Tanner got the courage to say whatever it was he needed to tell her, when he finally opened the notebook and flipped the front over the back, staring down at a page inside, his eyes distinctly scanning rapidly over whatever he'd written while she watched him. Then he glanced up at her again, biting his lip.

"I, I- -uh, this is going to sound like a weird question," He said, his face flushing bright red, "But do you know what pronouns are?"

It took her mind a few seconds to catch up to what he'd actually said. The way he'd started blushing, she'd feared for a few terrible seconds that they were about to have The Talk whether she was prepared for it or not.

"What?" She said, trying to figure out what he was asking. Was this some sort of new slang? He was still blushing furiously. That was not a good sign. "Pronouns, you mean like in grammar?"

He nodded, still blushing, and now unable to meet her eyes, which only increased her confusion.

But she began to relax though the confusion, some of her worry slipping away. Maybe he wasn't in trouble, maybe he just needed

help with his homework and was embarrassed to ask. Had she really made it seem like he couldn't come to her with questions about his homework?

She said, trying to keep herself from laughing with relief, "Do you need help with your English homework...?"

Tanner looked up to stare at her like she'd grown a second head.

"What?" Then he stammered, laughing a little as his eyes widened, "Oh, no, no, oh my gods, no. I don't need help with my homework. We aren't even learning about grammar, we're reading a book." He shook the notebook a little, for some sort of emphasis.

"Oh." Now Patricia was confused again. "Okay...? Then why are you asking me about pronouns?"

Tanner didn't say anything right away, but his shoulders tensed as he stared down at the notebook, fiddling with a corner of one of the pages.

Then he said, "Because I want to change mine."

Patricia felt her eyebrows raise themselves up to her hairline. "Huh?"

What did that even mean?

"What are you- -" she started to ask.

He interrupted again, his voice determined. "I'm nonbinary."

She took a moment to process that, but came up with nothing but confusion.

"What does that mean?" She asked, shaking her head, trying to fit the pieces of this conversation into something coherent. First she thought he was going to tell her he was on the run from the police or something, then she thought he needed help with homework, and now she just had no idea what was going on. "I don't understand."

Tanner set the notebook back down on the table, flipping the cover back over so it was shut again. She noticed that the front was just as covered in drawings, some of them scratched out or painted over, as the back.

He tapped his fingers on the cover, as though reminding himself it was there, before he said, his voice hesitant, "Do you know what the word transgender means?"

Her eyebrows raised even further, even as a slowly dawning

realization and memory took root. "Yes..." She said slowly, trying to keep her tone of voice normal and calm despite the way it suddenly felt like her heart wanted to leap out of her chest. Now she knew how Tanner must be feeling, from the look on his face. "I knew a couple people back in college who were like that. Actually, one of my roommate's friends was trans. She asked us to call her Riene instead of her birth name, and asked us to use female...oh." Oh. Oh. That was why he'd asked if she knew what pronouns were. He wanted to change his pronouns. Her son- -no, wait, daughter- -no, wait- -

Tanner looked at her, his expression hopeful. "So you'd be okay if I changed my pronouns?"

The words "Of course, sweetie." were out of her mouth before she even processed them. Now her mind was racing for a whole different reason. She would have to start practicing calling Tanner by female pronouns right away, she would have to tell Tracy, and Kara if she didn't already know, she would have to- -

"Okay, well, that- -that's good. I want to change them to de, ad, ath, and adself."

That brought her up short.

She blinked. "What? I thought you meant you wanted- -"

She stopped.

Now she was really confused.

"I thought you would want to use female pronouns?"

Tanner grimaced, shaking his head. "No. I mean, they aren't really female pronouns, but that's- -" he shook his head again, and waved a hand dismissively. "No. I don't want to use she/her pronouns. I'm trans, but I'm not a girl. I'm nonbinary- -I'm not a boy or a girl. I'm..." He shrugged. "Not binary. I'm neither. I'm something else. That's why I want to change my pronouns."

Patricia wracked her brain, trying to remember what he'd said he wanted to change them to. Something with a D...? She'd never heard of them before.

"What did you say you wanted to change them to?" She asked, mentally shoving all other thoughts away so she would remember them this time. She was determined not to mess this up, even if she was extremely confused. This was what she got for not drinking her morning coffee.

"De, ad, ath, and adself." Tanner said, flipping open the notebook so he could rip out a page and push it across to her, trailing little bits of paper on the table from where the edges had gotten caught in the spiral.

Written on the page in black marker, the hand writing so careful and perfect she could almost feel the nervousness in it, the notebook read:

De/ad/ath/adself:

he = de

him = ad

his = ath

himself = adself

Example:

Tanner is my child, and de is nonbinary. This means de isn't a - -

The sentence continued, but Tanner spoke again before she could read more, drawing her eyes back to his and away from the paper.

"I know it might seem complicated," He- -de!, she reminded herself at the speed of light- - started to say, lifting a hand to the back of- - she glanced down at the paper- - ath? yes!- -head in embarrassment, "But you just replace what you used to call me with the new ones. If you would have said he, you say de. If you would have said him, you say ad. If you would have said his, you say ath, and if you would have said himself, you say adself."

She was doing her best to memorize this, burning the pattern into her mind as quickly as she could, and she nodded seriously to show she understood. 'De, ad, ath.' she thought to herself, 'de, ad, ath.' Easy enough. 'De, ad, ath.'

But h- -de must have seen something in her expression to sow doubt, because de crossed ath arms defensively over ath chest, and said, as though to counter an argument de assumed she was going to make, "Matt and Alice have been using my pronouns for two months now."

With the unspoken insinuation that if she tried to protest that it was 'too difficult' or 'too complicated', then she was admitting that a pair of highschoolers were smarter than her.

She didn't know what it said about her as a parent that her child's first assumption was that she would hate ad for being transgender,

but she needed to do something to fix that.

"Okay," She said, hoping her tone came across the way she wanted it to, calm and accepting and not angry at all, "So I just want to make sure I'm saying this right. Um, okay- - 'Tanner and I are going shopping today, since de needs some new clothes and school supplies, and afterward, I want to bring ad to Nicko's, since I know its ath favorite restaurant, and it's just the two of us while Kara and Tracy are away on their camping trip, and they shouldn't be allowed to have all the fun. Did I get that right?"

Tanner stared at her, ath face slightly blank. Then a smile quickly began to spread across ath face, until de was grinning widely. "That was perfect! How did- -wha- -" De looked shocked, and more than a little confused. "I thought you'd be..."

De trailed off, obviously not wanting to say the words 'screaming at me' out loud.

Patricia felt the disquiet in the pit of her stomach sink deeper.

Her child thought she would hate ad for being transgender. Her child thought her reaction would be to scream and yell and punish ad.

As though de could sense what she was thinking, Tanner said softly, looking away, "We thought, well, I mean, I thought you'd be mad." De laughed nervously, still not looking at her. "I actually wondered if I should pack a bag before I came down to talk to you."

And it suddenly occurred to her why de'd waited until now, specifically, to tell her this. It was just the two of them in the house, and it would be for the next three days. Tracy and Kara were out on their father-daughter-bonding camping trip.

If she'd reacted badly to Tanner's revelation, de only had one person de needed to run away from, and three days to figure out how de was going to deal with Tracy and Kara's reactions.

The urge to ask ad where de would have run to was strong, but she kept her mouth shut. There was no point in asking, because de probably wouldn't tell her, and she could already guess.

De would have gone to Matt or Alice's. Probably Alice's, since the Jacksons were rich enough that if she or Tracy tried to press the issue, the Jacksons could probably just sue them for child abuse and have Tanner and Kara taken out of their custody faster than she could say 'kidnapping'.

Instead of asking questions neither of them wanted to answer, she leaned over the table, reaching a hand out, and said, "This is your home, Tanner, and you will never be forced to leave just for being yourself."

Tanner was still looking towards the living room, and either didn't notice, or was pretending not to notice her offered hand.

"How do you think dad will react?" Ath voice was quiet, ath voice rough like de was trying to control ath emotions.

Ath eyes were closed, she suddenly realized. Tanner had ath eyes tightly closed, and ath fists clenched on ath knees. De was breathing slowly and deeply, and she suddenly realized that as anxious as she felt, it couldn't begin to compare to how Tanner had to be feeling.

De was just a kid, coming out to a parent, with no way to know how she would react. She couldn't imagine how terrifying it had to be to not know whether your parents would still love you, or whether or not you would still have a home when the conversation was over.

Her parents hadn't approved of her choice to study ghosts, but that was her choice. She could have chosen any other field of study, and while her parents were dismissive and disappointed, she'd never

feared for her safety, never feared for even a second that they would disown her.

Were ath eyes closed because de was fighting back tears?

How could she have raised her children to fear her?

"Tanner..." Her voice struggled not to break. "Your father loves you just as much as I do. He's still going to love you no matter what. You don't even have to worry- -he's the one who taught me how to use our friend's pronouns back in college.

"I kept messing up because I never thought about it until I was right there talking to her, and it was so embarrassing and frustrating for both of us, but he pulled me aside to explain that I needed to practice with her pronouns if I wanted to get them right.

"He'd been friends with her longer than I had, he knew her back before she asked people to change what they called her, and he gave me sentences to practice in my head so I wouldn't keep messing up, and it helped so much. I stopped embarrassing myself and Riene, and..." She trailed off, unsure where she was going with this, besides: "Your father and I love you. We aren't going to kick you out, or disown you, or anything like that. Your father will be happy to use

your new pronouns, and I guarantee you that he- -and I - -will annihilate anyone who tries to cause you problems."

Something in Tanner's face twitched, and she took it as a sign that she was on the right track.

"We're going to support you, Tanner, no matter what pronouns you use, no matter that you're...what did you say it was called? Nonbinary? I'm not judging, I just never heard of it before now."

De nodded, still keeping ath eyes closed, though ath breathing had calmed down a little. "Yeah, I'm nonbinary. Non-binary, as in not binary. Neither girl nor boy, neither male nor female, neither..." De trailed off, then shook ath head.

"It just means I'm your kid instead of your son." De said, "Or, well, Alice suggested you could call me your sprout because vamp likes plants so much, but I'm not very good with plants so, yeah, you can just stick with kid for now, if anyone asks."

Patricia pulled her hand back, since de still hadn't taken it or noticed. The fact that he had referred to Alice as 'vamp' didn't escape her notice. "Okay, nonbinary. That makes sense." She said, mentally face palming at how obvious it was once she thought about the word.

Nonbinary, non-binary, not-binary. Neither male nor female, girl nor boy, son nor daughter. "Your father will understand, probably even better than I do, since he knew a lot more trans people back in college than I did."

And knew them better, too.

...Should she ask about Alice? The fact that de'd said anything at all meant de would probably want to share more, and she felt like it would be better to just get all of it out in the open at once.

"So, has Alice changed- -" She hesitated for a moment, then forged on, "Pronouns too? It sounded like you said 'vamp'."

Which definitely sounded short for vampire, and from what she knew of Alice, that fit the bill perfectly, though she wasn't aware of any pronouns in any language that sounded like vampire. But then, she'd never heard of de, ad, or ath, either.

Tanner had finally opened ath eyes again, and this time de was looking at her, looking much more relaxed and normal. "Yeah," De said, "Alice has a few different sets, and Matt and I cycle through them." Ath eyes narrowed a little. "Do you want to know Alice's pronouns?"

There was definitely a challenge in that tone, and were it not for the situation, it would have annoyed her. But she knew he was only sticking up for that friend, making sure Patricia's support wasn't conditional on the person in question being a member of the family.

She smiled, glad she was going to pass the test. After the reaction Tanner'd thought she'd have, she needed to restore that faith in her. She couldn't believe she'd ever let it slip so far, couldn't believe she'd allowed her kid to believe she could ever hate dad. "I would love to learn Alice's pronouns." She said.

Tanner's expression stayed suspicious. "Alice uses vamp/pyr/pyrs/vampself, ghost/ghosts/ghostself, bat/bats/batself, and thorn,thorns,thornself. And before you complain, bat started using ghost/ghostself specifically to annoy thorns parents, so if you start complaining, it'll just make ghost even more spiteful."

That was a lot to take in, but Patricia nodded, having guessed that much for herself. Since Tanner had been kind enough to write down that pronouns, she could guess how the others were meant to be used. Just replacing she, her, hers, and herself with the words Tanner had listed.

"It might get a little confusing if there's a ghost," She said, "but I

don't think it should be that hard to get used to." She hesitated, wondering if this next question was going to make her lose parenting points. "Could you write these down for me so I don't forget?"

To her surprise, Tanner smiled widely. Apparently that had been the right question to ask.

De opened the notebook again, and pulled out another piece of paper, and slid it across the table to her. De'd already had all of them written down.

Then de pulled out another piece, and passed that over as well.

"Matt uses tech/techno/techs/techself. Both their parents know about their pronouns, and Matt's are fine with it, Alice's..." De shrugged, but smiled. "Not so much. But that's the way ghost likes it."

Patricia took both pages and studied them, seeing that they were in the same format as the first, showing the old pronouns and the new ones, with an example sentence to show how to use them, with each letter written out so neatly it must have taken ten minutes just to write out a few simple words.

She wondered why de hadn't just used the printer. But then, that

would have required asking to use the printer, and of course she would have wanted to know what de was printing...so, no, it made sense for why de'd hand written them.

But there were other questions she should be asking. She remembered dealing with these questions way back when in college. "So, is there anyone I shouldn't use your pronouns around?"

She really didn't want to phrase it as "am I one of the last people to find out", but she was having a hard time figuring out a better way to phrase it. "Like if we're out at Nicko's, or if I need to talk to one of your teachers. Do you want me to use your pronouns, or...?" And she hadn't even asked if de wanted to change ath name yet...

Tanner nodded. "I want you to use my pronouns. Now that I've told you, and I'll tell dad and Kara once they get back, I want to use them all the time. I want everyone to use them. It just- -" Ath smiled widened. "It just really makes me happy, I don't how to explain why. It just feels right."

She nodded, trying and failing to understand, but accepting it anyways, knowing it was important to ad that she supported ad.

She didn't need to understand it to respect it- -that was one of the

things she'd had to learn quickly in college if she didn't want to lose all her friends and husband-to-be.

Realizing what sort of people she would have had to make friends with if she chose the wrong path had set her straight almost immediately. She'd always thought of herself as open-minded, and her days in college had been the first time that conceptualization had actually been stress-tested in the real world.

She was just glad she'd been willing to listen and learn instead of cementing herself into the mindset of a bigot- -she'd seen the sort of people who mocked Riene for being trans, and they were the exact sort of people who would mock any woman for not conforming to their idea of womanhood, whether they were trans or not. They were the conservatives and republicans, hateful bigots to their core. They hated the poor, they hated the disabled, they hated women, they hated people who weren't straight white Christians, and they hated queer people.

Patricia hated that she could have so easily become one of them if she'd only made a few different choices. If she'd believed the lies that people like Riene were trying to infiltrate and destroy feminist spaces, trying to lull her into a false sense of security. Riene wasn't dangerous, wasn't trying to infiltrate anything, and neither were any

of the other trans women and men that Patricia met thanks to Tracy.

Every now and then they talked on the phone or shared emails with their old classmates, but between studying the natural ghost manifestations that Port Free Haven was a hotspot for, building prototypes for their own ghost shrine in their basement, preparing for and then raising two kids, and now hunting ghosts as a full-time job, there wasn't much time left in the day to chat with old friends, let alone make new ones. She knew Port Free Haven had its own thriving Queer community, but she'd never had time to join in on any of the events, though she knew Tracy had been making the time.

But maybe she should make some time, too.

But there was one more question she should be asking, just to be sure. "So do you want to change your name?"

De sat back a little, brow furrowed. "Um." De shrugged again. "I'll have to get back to you on that, since I haven't decided what I'd change it to if I did. You can still call me Tanner for now."

Well, that was one thing she didn't have to worry about. Setting up appointments with Port Free Havens' legal courts was like pulling teeth since the ghost incursion began, since they were so backed up

with insurance claims and all manner of ghost-related problems.

It would take months, if not a year to get an appointment to legally change Tanner's name if de chose to change it, though that wouldn't have stop her from calling in to the school to make them change it on their files, or from telling people to use ath new name.

Tanner was tapping ath fingers on the notebook again. De was smiling again too, she was glad to see.

"I really didn't expect this conversation to go so well." De said, "Thank you, mom."

She shook her head. "You don't need to thank me," she said firmly, "I am your mother, it is my job to love you. I'm sorry I ever made you think I wouldn't love you just for being yourself. That is my fault, and I take responsibility for it. I've known about trans people since I was in college, and I made the mistake of assuming that you and Kara wouldn't be, couldn't be. I should have known better, and I'm sorry for never talking about these things with you when you were younger, so you knew what they were and that I knew what they were." She wanted to say, 'I guess your father and I have been too busy with work to talk to you about our friends', but she didn't want to make excuses. "But I want to support you, and I want to try to fix

my mistakes. I still have Riene's phone number and email, and, I mean, if you want, I can call her and see if she'd want to come over. I know you said you're not trans in the way she is, but she's really nice, and she might be able to answer any questions you have, and it'd be nice for me to catch up with her, it's been a long time since we spoke, and she lives over in the next city, so it's not too far of a drive. We could even go to visit her if she doesn't want to deal with the ghosts."

Tanner had frozen like a deer in the headlights, and she wasn't sure why. "Your friend...from college? Was this the same college where you met, uh, uncle Kurt?"

She winced at the reminder. "Ah, yes, but I promise she's nothing like Kurt." She reassured.

Kurt had always been Tracy's friend, not hers, and he was the one exception in her husband's impeccable taste in friends. He had wanted to date her since he first met her, and no matter how many times she turned him down, he just kept trying in small, subtle ways, and Tracy was oblivious. She loved her husband, but he had a blindspot the size of Texas when it came to Kurt and his behavior.

She'd tried talking to him about it a few times, but he always brushed

her off, insisting that she was reading things wrong, or it wasn't a big deal, ect ect ect.

She'd stopped bothering to bring it up, and now just tried to stay as far away from Kurt as she could. Fortunately, he lived several states away, so avoiding him was easy for the most part these days.

"Are you sure?" Tanner pressed, still looking nervous. "Kurt's... really creepy."

"No, Tanner, I promise it's not another Kurt situation. I know your father is...very attached to Kurt, but he'd always been...well, he's always been a bit of a creep. Your father just doesn't want to acknowledge it. Riene is nice, and completely normal, and not in any way a creep, I promise. In fact, she disliked Kurt as much as I did, and it was lucky he never really hung out with the rest of us, or he would have been kicked out. I promise not all of our friends from college are creepy rich people who live in creepy mansions. Kurt is the outlier."

Tanner still looked skeptical, but he said, "Well, if you're sure she's not a creep, then yeah, I guess it'd be cool to meet her. Could I invite Alice and Matt over too?"

"Of course, I'm sure she'd love to meet them! The last time we spoke, she told me she was running a sort of summer camp for young queer people, and I'm not sure if she's still doing it, but would that be something you'd be interested in?" She was thinking of the for-parents groups Riene had also said she ran, to help queer parents and parents of queer kids learn more so they could better support their children.

Tanner laughed nervously. "Um, how about I let you know after I meet her?"

"That's fair." She conceded easily. Kurt really had set a bad precedent for introducing their old friends to their kids. She would have to make sure to look up some better friends, see what they were up to.

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Tanner asked, "So, uh, I was going to invite Alice and Matt over after I talked to you if it went well, to tell them the good news. Can I, or do I still have to wash the dishes?" De was warily side-eying the pile of mugs she'd put in the sink, and the faint sounds the protohosts were making.

She'd almost forgotten about them entirely.

She shook her head, willing to let it slide just this once. For now. The longer the protohosts were inhabiting the mugs, the more samples she could collect, and she could go without coffee for a day. The lack of it hadn't failed her too disastrously. "You can do those tomorrow, go ahead and invite Alice and Matt over. If you still want to go to Nicko's- -"

"Yes!"

"- -we'll go for dinner instead of lunch, and Alice and Matt can come with us if they want, then you can clean out the garage and wash the mugs tomorrow, and we can go shopping then too. You get the rest of the day off. Does that sound fair?"

"Yes!" De was practically vibrating in ath chair, and beaming so widely it had to be hurting ath face.

Suddenly, de bolted out of ath chair, and flung ath arms around her in a hug, almost causing her to fall backwards. She caught herself with a laugh, then hugged ad back tightly.

"Thank you." De said softly, ath voice slightly muffled in her shoulder so that it came out sounding a bit strange.

"You don't need to thank me." She whispered back, hugging ad tightly, "I'm your mother. It's my job."

De let go, and she released ad, and de stepped back, still grinning from ear to ear. "I'm gonna go call Alice and Matt!" De exclaimed. Then de spun around, bolted out of the room, and sprinted up the stairs.

She heard ath door slam shut, and thought to herself, at least this time it's from excitement instead of anger.

She looked around the kitchen, trying to figure out what she should be doing now that she wasn't going to be getting those guano samples until tomorrow.

She'd been planning on building the first in a series of new ectoweapons, which, if they worked the way she thought they should, should cancel out a ghost's ectosignature once it gained a sample from it, which would either destroy the ghost outright, or at least reduce it to such a weakened state that it wouldn't be able to take on any form except a puddle of inert ectoplasm. She would only find out the exact results after she tested it.

It was something to look forward to.

She smiled to herself as she pushed out of her chair and headed back down into the lab, taking the pieces of paper Tanner had given her with her, knowing that she had multiple sets of pronouns she needed to practice if she wanted her kid to continue trusting her with important information about adself.

She swung into her chair in front of the computer, and thought, 'de, ad, ath, adself' as she loaded up the program she used for laying out the microchips. 'Tanner is my child, and I love ad very much. I hope de knows de can trust me with anything, and that I will love ad no matter what.'

If she started now, and worked until it was time to bring Tanner and his friends to the restaurant, then continued working on it when they got back, the new ectoweapon would be complete by the time Tracy and Kara got home from their trip, and she and Tracy could patrol together to test it after Tanner talked to them.

Maybe if they were lucky, they would even be able to hit the notorious Phantom of Park Street.

She smiled to herself, and thought, 'de, ad, ath...'

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Neopronouns: which follow the same rules as

Replace he with

Replace him with

Replace his with

Replace himself with

EX:

"He is going to adopt a new puppy soon, as soon as he gets a fence set up around his yard so the puppy can go outside without him having to walk it. His uncle is going to help set up the fence, since he has a set of power tools he's letting him use, since he lost his. He's going to buy toys and train the puppy himself."

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